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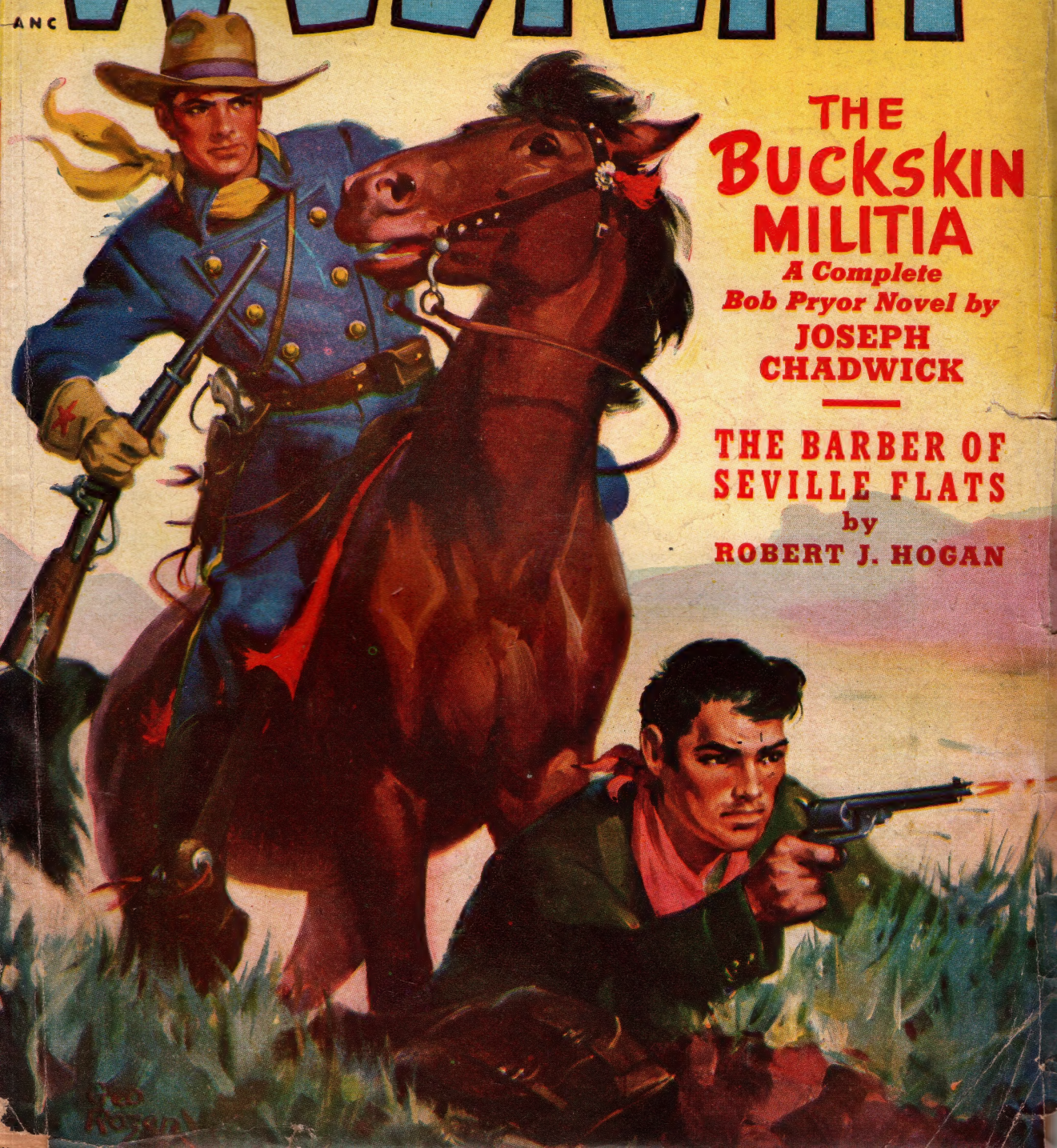

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The Rio Kid Western

Vol. XXI, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION JANUARY, 1951

A NEW BOB PRYOR NOVEL

The Buckskin Militia

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

When a deadly band of renegade killers preys on freighters from Deadwood to Cheyenne, the Rio Kid plunges into the middle of a roaring range ruckus to fight for peace and justice! 9

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THE Bunkhouse

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HI WADDIES, gather with us again at the old bunk house while we loll in the autumn twilight, relax and speak whatever is on our minds. When a group of cowboys are lounging around with nothing much on their minds the conversation is liable to drift into most any channel. But it is almost a sure bet that it will be Western. Then too if there are old-timers in the group the conversation is almost sure to drift back to the old days of free range and unfenced prairies.

We were sitting in front of the bunk house just a few evenings ago and Texas George was telling about the great Turkey Trot, down in his home town of Cuero, Texas, where in the heart of a great turkey raising country they hold an annual Turkey Trot and celebration each November. Thousands of turkeys are driven through the streets like cattle and it is a great sight.

It was time then for Sundown Slim to get into the conversation which he always does. This time it was to say that, the turkey herding and driving at Cuero was not the first of this kind of affairs. He told how turkeys were rounded up, on one occasion, and driven overland like cattle in a herd more than eighty years ago, in fact a few years before the great herds of cattle were driven up the Chisholm Trail to the Dodge City cattle market. He proceeded to tell the story, which also brought out the tale of a man credited with being Arizona's pioneer rancher.

The Story of Henry Hooker

As the story unfolded it developed that Henry C. Hooker, the man who put on the first turkey trot, or drive, was born at Hinsdale, New Hampshire in 1828. When just a lad he was seized by a desire to go westward. He started west, found employment for a time in a store in Kansas City, but this was not far enough west. He wanted to see the real frontier. He wanted to live the rough life of the frontiersman and to have adventures. As the talk of gold in California was a great topic of conversation in 1853 he had drifted to El Dorado County, California.

Hooker first engaged in mining without too much luck, then went to Hangtown, (later known as Placerville) opened a hardware store and soon built up a thriving business. About 1866 a fire swept away his house, his store and his entire stock of goods. As he carried no insurance, this disaster left him with scarcely a thousand dollars to his name. With a wife and three children to support and with no prospect of reestablishing himself in the hardware business, the outlook was gloomy indeed.

Business Acumen

However the business ability accredited to New England Yankees now asserted itself. With a few hundred dollars he was able to scrape together, he bought about five hundred turkeys from the ranchers in the surrounding country, at $1.50 a bird, or as the rancher would say $1.50 per head. His plan was to drive his turkeys across the mountains to the prosperous mining town of Carson City, Nevada, and there dispose of them at a handsome profit. It was a bold and novel scheme. There was no lack of joking and banter on the part of his Hangtown friends over what seemed to them a crazy idea.

Hooker was undaunted, however. With the aid of one helper and several trained dogs he headed his strange procession

(Continued on page 121)

HE RUINED A WOMAN'S LIFE!

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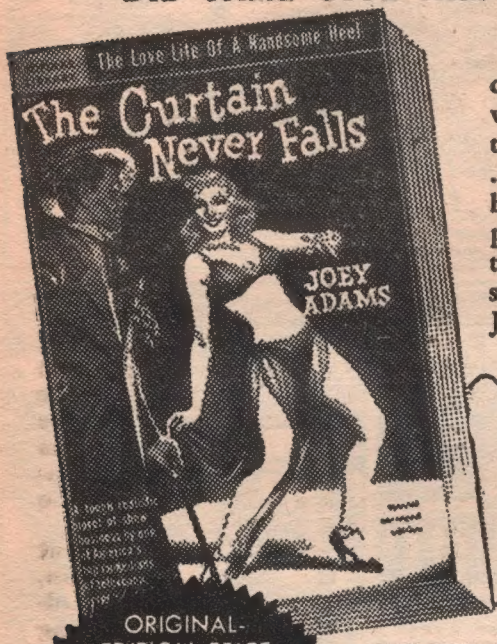

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MOTHER'S QUITE UPSET. CAN'T YOU GET OUR STATEMENTS LATER?
CERTAINLY, MISS BARLOW
I'LL TAKE THEM HOME AND COME DOWN TO HEADQUARTERS

TWO HOURS LATER

I GET MY DEGREE FROM NIGHT LAW SCHOOL NEXT MONTH
H-M-M-M, MY FIRM HAS STARTED MANY A YOUNG LAWYER UP THE LADDER . . .
I DIDN'T REALIZE HE'S SO HANDSOME

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The BUCKSKIN MILITIA

When a band of renegade killers preys on freighters from Deadwood to Cheyenne, Bob Pryor plunges into the core of a roaring range ruckus!

CHAPTER I

Feud in the Gold Country

NORTH of Cheyenne military law was still the only law, this summer of '76, despite the horde of civilians drawn by the discovery of gold in the Black Hills, and the Army continued to patrol the freighting routes.

A cavalry detail from Fort Laramie rode south over the Cheyenne Trail which was widened out of all proportion by the north-flowing traffic now in full tide, and regarded with a jaundiced eye the motley stream of humans, animals and vehicles. For several years the soldiers of the various posts—Laramie,

A RIO KID NOVEL

BY JOSEPH CHADWICK

Russell, Fetterman, Meade—had been under orders to keep gold-seekers from the Black Hills because of certain Indian treaties then being honored.

Finally orders for the Army to look the other way had come from some high place, and the stampede started. Treaties had once again been scrapped, and every soldier in the country knew how the Sioux, the Cheyenne, and the Arapaho would take this treaty-breaking and invasion of their historic homeland. It meant that soldiers would fight and die —for gold that never reached their pockets.

These blue-clad troopers might stare with resentment at the gold hungry boomers hurrying along the trail—some by wagon, some by saddle horse, some afoot—and they might grumble about it among themselves. But mostly they accepted the invasion fatalistically, for after all it was a soldier's lot to fight and maybe die.

LIEUTENANT JEFFREY RAND was not attached to the detail. On leave and Cheyenne-bound, he was accompanying the detail as far as it had orders to go and then would continue on alone.

"It's too risky, an officer traveling alone any farther than absolutely necessary," the commanding officer at Fort Laramie had said.

The C. O. hadn't put it into words, but young Lieutenant Rand knew that it was not Indians or gold-seekers that an Army officer traveling alone had to fear. It was the freighters—the tough-hided, horny-fisted, buckskin-clad bullwhackers and muleskinners—of whom an officer must be wary.

Before the gold rush, only the Indians, the soldiers and the freighters had trailed through the country north of Cheyenne and the three had been and still were at odds. Hardy souls, rugged individualists, the freighters resented military law and hated the officers who enforced it—against them. And they not only broke the law on occasion, but at times retaliated for punishment with attacks upon officers caught off guard.

However, Lieutenant Rand was not worried about the prospect of riding alone for some thirty miles after he parted company with the detail. He was twenty-five, a West Pointer, an officer of the best army in the world, and a man of much pride and little fear. Besides, the lieutenant was on the most important mission of his life and it occupied his thoughts entirely. He was on his way to meet his fiancée, who was coming from far-off Philadelphia, and the train carrying her to him would arrive in Cheyenne tomorrow afternoon. The following day Lieutenant Jeffrey Rand and Miss Louise Brandon would be married.

Lieutenant McCloud, in command of the detail, was a dozen years older than Rand and a confirmed bachelor. He had a bronzed face as rugged as the surrounding hills, but a sly humor twinkled in his eyes. McCloud was well aware that his fellow officer's thoughts were elsewhere.

"From now on you're on your own, Mr. Rand," he said, when the detail reached Horse Creek, "and heaven help you."

Rand gave him a surprised look.

McCloud's face showed simulated concern. "The Army can no longer protect you, Lieutenant," he said solemnly. "You're about to start on a dangerous trail and you'll have to travel it without an escort."

Rand's surprised expression gave way to bewilderment. "You mean I can expect trouble with the Buckskin Militia?" he asked.

The warning of Colonel Harkness, the commanding officer at Fort Laramie, was recalled to his mind. Rand knew that some of the freighters with grudges against the Army had organized into an order they called the Buckskin Militia.

"You really think," he said, "those blamed bullwhackers and muleskinners will—"

McCloud looked gloomy, shook his head. "The Buckskins are the least of your worries, mister," he said. "I'm

not talking about what might happen to you along the trail. It's what'll happen to you at the end of that trail, when you embark—as they say—on the sea of matrimony. Never took a sea voyage, myself, but men who have risked it tell me they encounter mighty rough going at times."

all of them belong to the Militia, but you never can tell which ones are Buckskins."

"I'll watch my step, Sam. And I'll see you in ten days." Rand reined away.

He rode south, fording the Horse, keeping to the edge of the broad road. There was scarcely a quarter of a mile

CAPTAIN BOB PRYOR

Rand got it, then. McCloud was rawhiding him.

"Blast you, Sam!" Rand said. "For two cents I'd call you on that!"

McCloud's grin came. "Save your fighting for after the honeymoon, Jeff," he advised. He leaned from the saddle, offered his hand. "Joking aside, I wish you luck. And happiness."

Rand grasped the hand, laughing.

McCloud was in earnest the next moment.

"Keep your eyes open on the trail," he said, and glanced at the lowering sun. "You'll be riding by night, and you'll pass plenty of freighting outfits along the road. Don't let any of those freighters stop you for any reason. Not

of the trail without some traffic, and as the sun sank behind the western hills many of the gold-boomer outfits and freighting outfits halted to make night camp.

Thousands of men were already in the Black Hills, thousands more were on their way from all parts of the country, and it required an enormous tonnage of provisions, supplies and equipment to keep them going. Innumerable freight wagons, great canvas-sheeted rigs, were on the trail. Many were northbound with huge loads, and many others were southbound, empty.

Lieutenant Rand passed the outfits at a canter. Sometimes the freighters yelled an offensive word at him, but he

ignored the insults.

Rand was new to the frontier, but he had heard much about the feud between the freighters and the Army officers. It was of several years duration, and it had had its origin in the refusal of the bullwhackers and muleskinners to bow to authority in trivial matters—and in the determination of the military to make them submit to discipline.

Much hauling was done to the army posts and the Indian agencies, and at the end of a haul the freighters were inclined toward drunkenness and rowdyism. They would pick fights with the enlisted men, enter areas of the military establishments forbidden to them, antagonize Indians, and indulge in many other infractions of rules and regulations.

ARMY discipline was never laggard, and punishment was often severe. Many a freighter had been thrown into the guardhouse on sour bread and water. More than one had been "spread-eagled"—lashed to a cannon face to sun—or had been "sandbagged"—forced to march to and fro over a marked space with a gunny-sack of sand on the back. A few had even been sent to the miltary prison at Fort Russell.

In return, Lieutenant Rand had heard, the secret Buckskin Militia had made reprisals. Several officers caught alone on some trail had been tied to a tree or a wagon wheel and flogged. At Fetterman, army hay stacks had been burned. One company of infantry in camp had had their wagon mules driven off.

So young Lieutenant Rand rode warily for a time, but gradually he became lost in the more pleasant thoughts of a man soon to see his wedding day. Darkness overtook him. He passed a big encampment of freight rigs with scarcely a glance and, once beyond it, slowed his mount to a walk. When some minutes later a band of horsemen appeared from a dense brush thicket at the side of the road, Rand was caught off guard.

He reached for his revolver, but a blacksnake whip lashed out with great skill and wrapped itself about the Lieutenant's wrist. The pain was intense, and Rand's whole arm felt numb. Seven riders crowded in against him. His revolver was pulled from its holster and thrown to the ground. The reins were taken from his hands, and his horse, as the riders swung away, was towed along with Rand helpless in the saddle.

He knew it would do no good to protest, so remained as silent as his captors. He tried to study them, for future identification, but the darkness made them shadowy figures. They looked as nondescript as a thousand freighters Lieutenant Rand had seen. More so. For these seven were faceless.

They wore buckskin masks.

Young Jeffrey Rand was not immune to fear, but he gritted his teeth and steeled himself for the coming ordeal. He would not whimper under the cruel sting of the lash. . . .

Darkness had overtaken two riders who nevertheless still continued along the trail. It was obvious that they were in even more of a hurry to reach the Black Hills than the gold-seeking boomers, so were traveling on through the night to cover as many miles as possible before making camp. It was obvious, too, that the pair was used to making long, hard rides.

They were expert horsemen. They were as well mounted as men could be.

They had ridden far in silence, but now one of them—Captain Robert Pryor who after serving with honor throughout the Civil War had now come to be known as the Rio Kid—turned in his saddle.

"We'll keep going until midnight, *amigo*," he said to his companion, "then call it a day."

"*Si*," said his trail-mate, a young Mexican named Celestino Mireles. "Thees Deadwood, General. You think we get there in plenty time?"

Mireles had been riding slightly behind Pryor, but now came up, He rode with the unconscious skill of the *vaquero*. But when he swung his beautiful black gelding alongside the Rio Kid's mouse-colored dun, the mount

The Rio Kid and his companions fired at the renegades (Chap. XIV)

grew somewhat skittish. For the dun was nasty of temper.

Pryor called his rather unhandsome war steed Saber, and the animal was as dangerous as an unsheathed blade. It was trained to respond to its owner's slightest touch or softest murmur, but seemed to hate all other men—and other horses. Even now it became wall-eyed, bared wicked teeth, rippled the black stripe along its back, ready to fight. Only Pryor's hand on the reins and his low-voiced command kept Saber from attacking Mireles' black.

Horse and rider were fighters, and it seemed that both had been born under a troubled star. They had survived the War by some miracle, not by any special care given to self-preservation. As a cavalry captain in the Union Army, Bob Pryor had served under special orders of such generals as Grant, Sheridan, and the brash Custer. He was a Texas man, this Bob Pryor, and conscience had made his choice between state and country, a choice he had never regretted, for all his love for Texas.

AT war's end, he had been far too restless to settle down at some peaceful trade or profession, especially when he had returned home to find it only wreckage, and his parents dead at bandit hands. His abounding energy had led him along many a twisted trail. The frontier beyond the Missouri to the Pacific, from the Mexican border to the Canadian, had come to know him as the Rio Kid.

He was in constant quest of adventure, but unlike many other restless men of the era Pryor had never drifted into lawlessness. On the contrary, the Rio Kid was famous for fighting against evil. And more than one understanding peace officer had commented, "We can be grateful that Pryor is on our side." There were times, here in the West, when it seemed possible that the forces of the law might not only be outnumbered but overwhelmed by the lawless.

A handsome man, Pryor was the typical cavalryman in size and weight. A roguish, devil-may-care gleam often appeared in his blue eyes. He had a flashing smile. Without effort on his part, the Rio Kid had been the cause of a fluttering in many a feminine heart. And men of his own sort always found him likable.

He still clung to Army ways. He wore an Army tunic, and the cavalry's yellow stripe edged the outer seams of his breeches. His military boots were always highly polished, and his crisp chestnut-colored hair beneath his campaign hat was close-cropped in military fashion.

Crossed cartridge belts carried two holstered Colt revolvers; another brace of revolvers rode in special holsters beneath his shirt. He was expert with small arms and carbine, but he was not a glory-seeking gun-fighter who notched his guns for every man who fell under his weapons. A force against evil, the Rio Kid could name a hundred famous men of the West who had called upon him for help when in need of expert guns backed by an iron nerve and good judgment. But humble men, too, could come to the Rio Kid when in trouble. and many such remembered him as a *compadre.*

Celestino Mireles was closest of all to Bob Pryor, however. A lean young Mexican, Mireles had bold features that showed his patrician blood. His eyes were dark, his hair black. He clung to Mexican attire, always wearing a high-peaked black sombrero, a braided *chaqueta,* laced *calzoneras*—trousers—of black velvet, a brilliant red sash, and boots of embossed leather. His spurs were silver, and the same precious metal decorated his bridle and saddle. Mireles also was well armed. There was a rifle on his saddle. He carried a long knife and a pair of revolvers in his sash and, like the Rio Kid, he was a dangerous man in a fight.

His own parents having been murdered by Border renegades during the War, Bob Pryor had rescued Mireles, as a youth, from a band of brutal outlaws while following the vengeance trail.

Since that bloody day, they had been inseparable comrades.

They were bound together by respect and affection, and when Celestino Mireles addressed the Rio Kid as "General" or "general mio"—his only name for his companion of the trails—it was not jokingly. The Mexican was convinced that Bob Pryor was a great soldier, one deserving of the highest rank.

CHAPTER II

Seven to Two

THE Rio Kid had been slow to answer his trail-mate's question.

"I hope we'll reach Deadwood in time to help Steve Eberts," he finally said gravely. "But I don't know what kind of trouble he's in. His letter that reached me while we were in Cheyenne wasn't too clear. Steve's not much of a hand with a pen. If I didn't know him for a level-headed sort, I wouldn't worry. But Steve isn't one to cry 'wolf' unless there really is a wolf."

He was concerned, for he knew that Steve Eberts was a capable man with a pride that wouldn't let him ask for help unless he found himself cornered. Eberts had been a cavalry lieutenant under Pryor during the War Between the States. They had been close friends until mustered out of the Army, and over the years they had written to each other occasionally.

But Eberts' last letter had been written in haste, under stress, and left too much to the imagination. Pryor knew only that Steve Eberts had joined the gold rush to the Black Hills, not to pan for gold, but to start a store. By nature, Eberts was a merchant, and had the good judgment to make use of his special talent for trade. He had opened his store in Deadwood, the largest of the camps that had sprung up in the newly opened gold fields.

"Deadwood ees a bad place, eh, General?" Mireles asked.

"A wild place, no doubt," Pryor told him. "Like most new boom towns."

They fell silent again, riding on through the night at an easy lope. They had passed many camps along the trail, the night camps of boomers and freighters, but now they were traveling a lonely stretch with brush and trees along both sides of the road. After perhaps a half mile, they rounded the base of a steep slope and saw the glare of a high-blazing campfire. One look, and the Rio Kid reined in sharply.

"Hold it, Celestino!" he said brusquely.

The Mexican halted beside him. Mireles murmured a startled oath in Spanish as he saw what was happening at the camp beyond.

Half a dozen huge freight wagons were in a rope corral. A bunch of saddle horses stood to one side of the camp. The men who drove the freight rigs—muleskinners and their swampers—were grouped apart from the men who had evidently ridden in on the now ground-hitched horses, and they were merely spectators.

The Rio Kid saw seven men taking an active part in an ugly business at hand, and each of the seven wore a full-faced mask of what appeared to be buckskin. They had an eighth man tied to the rear wheel of a wagon, spread-eagled, face to the wheel, stripped to the waist.

The victim was a young man, and he wore cavalry boots and breeches. Mireles saw that too.

"A soldier, General!" he whispered.

One of the masked men waved back his fellows, stepped close to the tied soldier. He had a blacksnake whip in his hand. He uncoiled it, poised himself, swung the whip back for the first blow. The soldier was to be flogged!

The Rio Kid did not know in what way the soldier had injured or offended these masked men, but he held no brief for men who hid their faces and dealt out their own brand of punishment. The Rio Kid reached for his saddle gun as the lash struck its first blow upon the soldier's naked back.

The carbine cracked.

The Rio Kid's shot hit no target. It was a warning shot, an order, as it were, to cease and desist. Alarm swept through the men gathered about the flogging victim. The masked man with the whip froze. The other mask-wearers were galvanized into confused action. Several grabbed out their guns and peered one way and another, seeking the source of the shot. Others ran to their horses.

The freighters making up the audience to the flogging milled about, most raising empty hands to show that they wanted no part of a gun-battle. There were frightened yells, angry curses.

Then one of the freighters sighted the two horsemen on the rise beyond the camp.

"They're on the road, Buckskins!" he bellowed. "There's only two of 'em! You can handle 'em, easy!"

THE masked men called Buckskins saw the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles now, and the entire bunch opened fire. Three who were already mounted turned their horses toward the two partners, and the other four were running to their mounts. The odds were seven to two, but the Rio Kid had no thought of retreating and leaving the soldier at the mercy of these men.

"All right, *amigo*," he said. "They're asking for it."

His carbine began to crack again, rapidly, this time with deadly intent. Mireles' started shooting with his six-guns.

The vengeance guns were blazing once more.

The Rio Kid and his *compadre* indulged in no haphazard each-man-for-himself style of fighting. Long ago they had developed a cover-up system in which Pryor pressed the attack while Mireles defended, or covered him. So they fought against odds, and so they met the on-rushing Buckskins.

As the Rio Kid fired on the foremost of the band, Mireles shot at those who showed signs of taking more careful aim from the rear. The masked rider in the lead toppled from his mount at the Rio Kid's second shot. Another was winged by his third shot, and swerved off screaming. Mireles downed a man who had reined in for steadier shooting.

The maneuver not only cut down the odds, but served to throw the Buckskins into a sudden panic. The Rio Kid was quick to see the attackers falter.

"Let's get at 'em, *amigo!*" he yelled.

He let Saber out, and the eager war horse needed no spurs. Wildly excited, eager to get into the midst of the battle, the dun galloped down the slope. Mireles' black pounded along, slightly to the left rear. The man the Rio Kid had wounded was already fleeing, and the remaining four suddenly scattered—every man for himself.

Mireles targeted one, and the man uttered an animal-like yelp of pain and fright. The fellow slumped over his pommel, but managed to cling to his spooked mount. The Rio Kid rode alongside another, calling on him to surrender. The Buckskin's reply was to twist in the saddle and fire at the Rio Kid. The slug whined past Pryor's head.

He swung his carbine up, but before he could fire Saber struck. The dun rammed in against the other horse, knocking it off stride. The Buckskin's mount squealed in terror, began to buck. The rider flung himself off the right side, hit the ground running, plunging into the brush.

Saber reared, striking out at the enemy horse with his front hoofs. The Rio Kid fought to get the fierce dun under control, but at the same time glancing all about the hollow.

There were now no signs of the masked riders, except for the two sprawled dead on the ground. The other five, including the two who were wounded, had made their escape. Darkness cloaked them now, and the sounds of their wild flight through the brush were already fading.

The Rio Kid swung his dun about, faced the crowd of freighters.

He could feel their hostility, but they still showed no signs of taking a hand in the affair. They were all burly men, tough-visaged, and it was with relief

that Bob Pryor realized that he would have no trouble with them. He was cautious, however.

"Keep watch, *amigo*," he told Mireles.

He rode toward the wagon to which the flogging victim was bound. The glow of the high-blazing campfire showed him the lettering upon the side of the wagon:

TERRITORIAL FREIGHTING COMPANY

"Stranger," one of the freighters growled, as the Rio Kid dismounted, "you sure dealt yourself a hand of grief. The Buckskin Militia ain't likely to forget you."

The Rio Kid swung about. The speaker, standing out in front of the others, was the same man who had urged the masked riders to "get" him and his partner at the start of the gun-fight. He was a hulking giant, well over six feet tall, and enormous through the body. He wore a flannel shirt, buckskin trousers, flat-heeled boots, a wide-brimmed hat.

HIS shirt was half-unbuttoned, revealing a muscle-corded chest heavily matted with reddish hair. The brim of the fellow's hat was turned up in front and secured to the crown with a sliver of ashwood whittled in the shape of a knife. The man's face was square-cut, his features coarse, with a stubble of rust-red beard. His eyes were a china-blue beneath thick reddish brows, deep-set, mean-looking. The blocky face was scowling. The left cheek bulged with a tobacco cud.

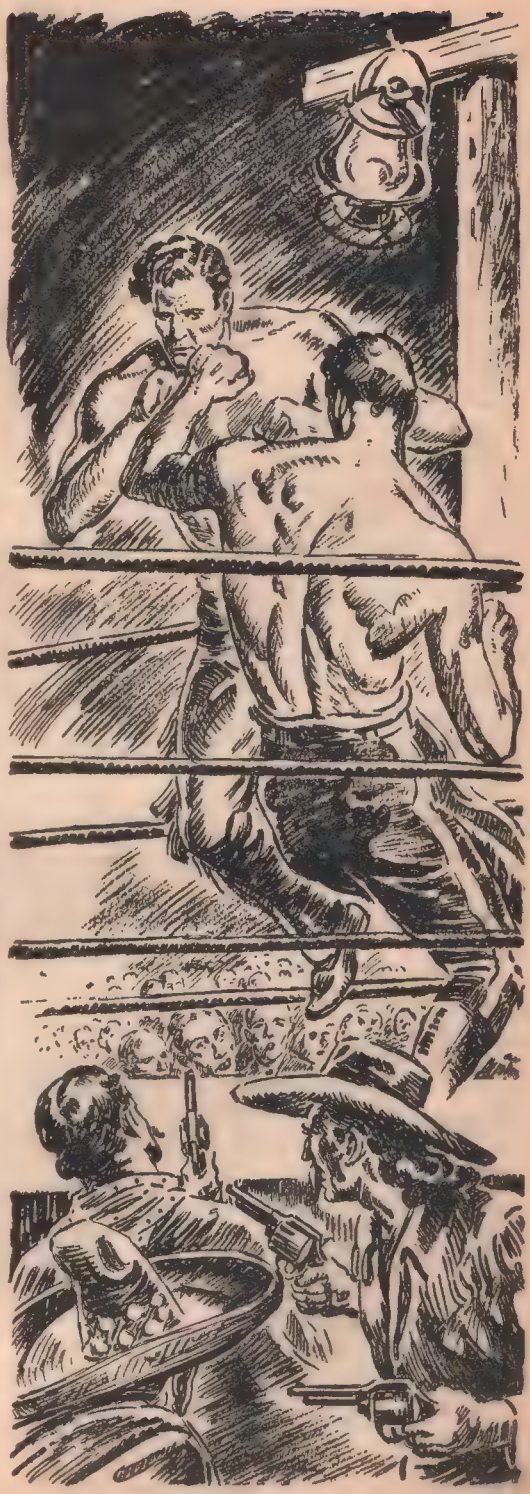
"So that bunch calls itself the Buckskin Militia?" Pryor said.

"That's right, mister," the burly freighter retorted. "And the seven you and your Mexican jumped are only a small part of the Militia. Take my advice, and make yourself scarce. This climate sure won't be healthy for you from now on."

"Friends of yours, the Buckskins?"

"I ain't saying so, mister."

"The name's Pryor—Captain Bob Pryor," said the Rio Kid. "And I'm saying so for you. If they weren't friends of yours, you and your crew would have



A gun roared and a slug whined over the Rio Kid's head (Chap. VIII)

stopped them from flogging this soldier."

"Big talker, ain't you?" the freighter sneered, and spat contemptuously. "So long as your partner's backing you up with his guns. But I'll admit it. Sure, I'm friendly toward the Militia. What freighter ain't? But you say I'm a member of the Militia, and I'll drive the lie back down your throat with my fist, guns or no guns covering me!"

The man's tone more than his words got under Bob Pryor's skin.

He sized the freighter up more closely, and suddenly realized that, although he wore a gun, the fellow was a brawler. As he had threatened, he would use his fists to avenge an insult at the drop of a hat. The Rio Kid's face turned rocky.

"Don't worry about my partner's guns—if you're itching for a fight," he said. "Just come on, swinging."

The burly man looked tempted. But he spat again, and growled:

"Another time, Mr. Pryor. Another time, when I'm sure I don't have to worry about that Mexican's guns. Right now, you take that soldier and clear out of my camp. But don't get the idea that I'm backing down for you. Jake Riordan ain't the kind to back down for any man!" He turned his back on the Rio Kid. "All right, boys," he growled to his fellows. "The fun's over for tonight. Let's turn in."

Pryor turned to the man tied to the wagon wheel, taking his jackknife from his pocket. There was one ugly welt across the soldier's bare back. The man turned after his bonds were cut, a good-looking fellow of about twenty-five. There was anger in his eyes, but he managed a smile.

"Thanks, Captain," he said heartily, and held out his hand. "I never owed so much to any man. Lieutenant Rand, sir, from Fort Laramie."

Pryor grasped the proffered hand. He took an instant liking to Lieutenant Rand.

Once Rand had found and donned the clothes that had been stripped from him by the Buckskin Militia, and mounted his sorrel horse, he rode away from the freighter camp with the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles. Their departure was accompanied by jeers and taunting comments flung after them by Jake Riordan and his freighters.

South of the camp, Rand reined in at the spot where he had been taken prisoner. He dismounted, searched for his gun, and was lucky enough to find it. Mounting again, he said, "I won't take you farther off your trail, gentlemen, though I would enjoy your company. I'm headed for Cheyenne, and since you're traveling north—"

Pryor nodded. "We're in a hurry to reach Deadwood, Lieutenant," he said. "I'm pretty sure those masked riders had too big a scare thrown into them to return and jump you again. But keep your eyes open—and your gun in your hand."

"I'll do that, Captain. And you two had better watch your step."

"We won't be caught napping," Pryor replied. "I'm curious, Lieutenant. Just what is this Buckskin Militia?"

Rand frowned. "It's a secret order thought up by some freighters with grudges against the Army," he said bitterly. "The members take an oath that they'll take revenge on any officer who falls into their hands. It's a vicious organization that should be stamped out, but so far the Army hasn't been able to learn the identity of a single member. Tonight was the first time any group of Buckskins has been interfered with, so far as I know." Rand leaned forward in the saddle. There was real concern in his voice. "You and Mireles will be marked men, Captain," he said earnestly. "I advise you, as a friend, not to trust any man not in uniform. There is no telling who belongs to the Militia."

Pryor nodded gravely.

"As for Jake Riordan," Rand went on, "watch out for him. I've encountered him before, and I've heard plenty about him. He's a vengeful sort—and as vicious as a mad-dog."

"Riordan struck me as more than just a muleskinner."

"He is more," said Rand. "He's head

wagon boss for Territorial Freighting. And I'd gamble a month's pay that he's also a member of the Buckskin Militia, for all his denying it!'

CHAPTER III

Deadwood

LEAVING Lieutenant Rand, the Rio Kid and Mireles again turned north. They swung off the trail and circled wide around Jake Riordan's camp, not wanting to risk being bushwhacked. The Rio Kid had no way of knowing whether or not Riordan and his freighters might try to ambush him but, with what Lieutenant Rand had told him still fresh in his mind, he was unwilling to take chances. And five miles farther on, when halting, he and his trail-mate made their camp in some timber well back from the trail. They built no fire that would have marked their camp for prowling Buckskins.

As they spread out their bedrolls, Mireles said, "You think, General, that maybe your friend, Senor Eberts, ees in trouble with these same hombres?"

"I've been wondering about that," the Rio Kid replied. "We'll find out, soon as we reach Deadwood."

They carried grub in their saddlebags, and at dawn Mireles built a fire and rustled up breakfast while Pryor saddled the horses. They ate, then scattered their fire, mounted and rode out. Traffic was again flowing along the trail. Pryor and Mireles, riding at a lope, overtook and passed freight and boomer outfits. It was still two hundred-odd miles to Deadwood.

The trail crossed the North Platte, and the Upper Niobrara. It swung across the northwest corner of Nebraska, into South Dakota, and the South Fork had to be forded. Beyond were the Black Hills, and the two partners began to see prospectors, scattered diggings, and an occasional mushrooming camp. After a long hard journey they finally rode into Deadwood.

The camp, already a sizable town, was booming.

Thousands of men were already there, and Main Street was thronged with them, with bull outfits, mule-drawn wagons, burros under pack. Traders did a thriving business right off their wagons. One enterprising merchant was reaping a harvest of gold dust by selling nothing but apples.

Woodchoppers were cutting trees everywhere, and three sawmills were in operation. Carpenters kept up a racket fashioning the green pine planks, still dripping sap, into flimsy buildings. Most of the town was still under canvas, however. Tents of all shapes and sizes were scattered in hodge-podge fashion across a wide flat and along a hillside.

A mile-long gorge led to the town, but it was only wide enough for two wagons to pass. The clear water Whitewood Creek joined the muddy Deadwood in the canyon, and the golddiggers had dyed the water red with iron stain by their sluicing.

Sluice boxes were everywhere. The first lumber freighted in and milled had gone into their construction. Men labored with picks and shovels, digging gravel and throwing it into the sluices, washing it for color. But not all were digging and panning for dust. Men had opened many business places—stores, shops, feed corrals, saloons, hotels, hashhouses, gambling-houses honkatonks. But everybody was fired by the fever to possess Deadwood's gold, one way or another.

Everybody but the two newest arrivals. The Rio Kid and his *compadre* were immune to the fever.

A Cheyenne-bound stage-coach rolled by, taking it slow and easy because of the congestion of the traffic, and a tow-headed boy, having hitched a ride from the stage company office, dropped off his precarious perch on the luggage boot. The youngster eyed Celestino Mireles.

"Say, soldier," he called to Bob Pry-

or, "your partner sure is a fancy dude. He a Mexican?"

"One of the best," Pryor replied, as Mireles grinned. Taking a half dollar from his pocket, Pryor said, "Tell me where Steve Eberts' store is, and this is yours."

"Give," said the boy. "Eberts' store is just beyond the Red Tent."

"Where's the Red Tent?"

"Shucks," the boy said scornfully, "everybody knows that." He pointed a dirty finger. "See that big tent? It sure ain't red, excepting for the sign. But that's the Red Tent, all right. Give."

Pryor chuckled. "Cocky kid, eh, *amigo?*" He caught Mireles' grinning nod, then dismounted and handed Saber's reins to the Mexican. "Time our horses got some grain. Take them to a feed corral, then meet me at Eberts' store. I'll wait for you there."

"*Si*, General," said Mireles, and turned away.

THE store beyond the big tent with the red sign proved to be a brand-new building about the size of a large packing-case. Or so it seemed to the Rio Kid. The door stood open, and he stepped inside. He halted just inside the doorway, peered about with doubtful eyes. He realized at once that he had made a mistake, that he had entered the wrong store. Steve Eberts couldn't be the proprietor of such a business.

There were no customers. There was so little stock that even such a cramped storeroom looked half-empty, and his first glance told him that it was the wrong kind of merchandise for a mining camp store.

The merchandise was displayed on a few wall shelves, on a plank counter, on a large table. There were flimsy overalls of the sort manufactured for the poorer farming sections—and miners wore only copper-riveted, heavy-weight jumpers and overalls. There were bolts of cloth, woolen and cotton. There were flat-crowned hats, the cheapest sort of hats, such as could be sold only in the southwest to Mexican farm and ranch hands.

The Rio Kid's astonished eyes saw school books, pencils, slates—and he had noticed only one child, the brash kid who had directed him here, on Deadwood's busy street. He saw boxes of colored stationery, and other items that the rough-and-tumble citizens of a booming camp would hardly call for. The store was neat and tidy. And deserted.

This couldn't be his friend's place.

He had started to back out when a curtain over a doorway to a rear room was lifted and a girl appeared.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said quickly. "We—I didn't hear anyone come in." She hurried forward, eager to make a sale. "Is there something I could show you?"

Bob Pryor would have been but half a man not to have experienced a quick, mild excitement. For this girl was hardly the sort one expected to meet in a rowdy mining camp. She was in her early twenties, he judged, a tall, blond girl with wide gray eyes and finely molded features. Not too tall, though, and a honey-shade blonde. Her smile was warming, if only a storekeeper's smile: full lips parted, revealing perfect teeth. Her voice was a cultured voice, with a hint of the deep South in it. The Rio Kid swept off his hat.

"I'm sorry, ma'm, but—" he broke off, seeing her smile waver and disappointment gather on her face. He knew that she had hoped for a customer, no doubt a badly needed customer. He tried again. "Well, I should like to buy a—a shirt."

"No, you wouldn't," the girl said, her smile wholly gone and replaced by a look of resignation. "You came in by mistake."

The bronze of the Rio Kid's face took on a red tint. "To be truthful," he admitted, "I was looking for Steve Eberts' store."

The curtain at the rear was pushed aside again, and a man of about Pryor's own age came into the store. He was tall, but he leaned heavily upon a cane because of a stiffened leg, and so was slightly stooped. He was blond like the girl, handsome as she was beautiful,

JOHN HUNTON

JOHN HUNTON was the pioneer freighting magnate in Wyoming Territory. He was hauling freight to the Army posts and Indian agencies before the country north of Cheyenne was settled by even the most venturesome ranchers. His bull trains plodded along the Medicine Bow Trail, the Cheyenne Trail, the Fetterman Trail, the Red Cloud Trail, and the Sidney Trail, and his bullwhackers were as tough a bunch of men as could be found in all the West.

Hunton had to defend his outfits against the Sioux, Cheyennes and other hostile tribesmen. He also was forced to take steps on numerous occasions to keep trouble between his employes and the soldiers, especially officers, from turning into bloody warfare. Bullwhackers and muleskinners were a rowdy breed that would never submit to military discipline, even when Army rule was the only law, and so frequent difficulties between them and the Army officers resulted. That John Hunton could control such men, if not force them to hew to the line of law and order, was proof of his moral and physical strength.

Freighters were far more important in the development of the West than they have been considered. They kept the Army posts supplied with provisions, guns, ammunition, gear, building materials. They furnished ranches, settlements, and mining camps with the necessities of life. Without the freighters, the white men could never have existed in Indian country, nor have won the frontier. In Wyoming Territory, John Hunton, with his bulls, mules, tough-hided teamsters, and great wagons, was certainly as important as any man.

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and it was evident that they were brother and sister.

"Is there anything I can do, Ginny?" the man asked.

"No, Dick," the girl replied. "This gentleman came in by mistake."

Pryor was about to apologize again, though why he should, for so slight an

error, he did not know. But a voice behind him in the doorway, a small but bold-as-brass voice stopped him.

"Soldier," it said, "you're in the wrong place. This is the Randalls' store, and they don't sell anything anybody wants to buy. Besides, soldier, they're Johnny Rebs!"

Pryor swung around, frowned at the youngster. It was the same boy who had directed him to "just beyond the Red Tent." A tow-headed boy with a smart-Aleck manner.

"Son, come here," the Rio Kid said.

Seeing the frown, the boy came slowly and warily.

"Son," the Rio Kid said, "the war ended about the time you were born. It's over and done with. There are no Johnny Rebs any more, and no damn' Yankees. We're all Americans. Now how about saying you're sorry?"

The boy hung his head, rubbed one bare foot over the other.

"I'm sorry," he said thickly. "Plumb sorry." He looked up, squarely at Dick and Virginia Randall. "I sure am," he said. "I won't call you that again."

Pryor laid a friendly hand on his shoulder. "Now you take me to Steve Eberts' store," he said.

HE bowed again to Virginia Randall, gave Dick Randall a smile and a nod, then went out with the boy. He rather pitied the Randalls. He had known other people like them; people of good background impoverished by the war and forced to leave their homeland to start anew, and always failing, in the world that they found an alien place.

Steve Eberts' store was just across the street, a plank building with a sign across the front that read:

THE EMPORIUM—GENERAL MERCHANDISE

Customers were going in and out, and Steve Eberts was kept busy enough to employ two clerks. The store was not neat and tidy like the Randalls' deserted establishment. Here was a great litter of merchandise, a confused assortment of stock that only Eberts and his busy clerks could fathom out. But it didn't require a merchant's eye to see that it was the sort of goods that moved quickly in a mining camp.

The Rio Kid picked his way through a big display of picks, shovels, and other tools. He saw kegs of nails and spikes, cases of canned goods, barrels of salt pork, shelves of heavy-duty clothing from hats to boots. There was a display of cooking utensils—kettles, coffee pots, skillets. There was a great stack of pans used for panning gold. A man with money or dust could step into the Emporium and outfit himself with every item necessary to living here in Deadwood or in the surrounding hills.

Steve Eberts finished waiting on a customer and saw the Rio Kid.

"Bob—Bob Pryor!" he cried, and rushed forward, deftly finding a path through the litter of merchandise.

He was not nearly so tall as the blue-clad Rio Kid, but he was thicker through the body. In fact, he was as typically the merchant as Pryor was the cavalryman. He had a roundish face, sandy hair, and blue eyes. Though only a year or two younger than Pryor, Eberts still had a boyish look. An amiable man. A friendly sort. Steve Eberts would always have customers because he could make people like him.

He grasped Pryor's hand.

"I'm sure glad to see you, Captain!" he said heartily.

CHAPTER IV

"Wild Bill"

FROM Eberts' attitude and hearty greeting, it was hard to believe that the merchant was in trouble. But he turned grave after taking his visitor to the back room which served as both his office and living quarters.

"Bob," he said at once, "I hope you didn't have to give

up some important affair because of my letter. I wouldn't have asked you to come, of course, if I hadn't been at my wits' end. I heard you were in Cheyenne and I knew that you'd help me if you weren't otherwise tied up."

"I was free to come, Steve," the Rio Kid said. "But nothing would have kept me from coming after receiving your letter." He gave his friend a curious look. "I'd have thought you were the last man in the world with trouble. You've a good business here, from what I've seen of it."

"A fine business, on the surface," Eberts replied. "It would be a gold mine if things were as they should be. I've a good stock on hand at the moment, because I received delivery on some freight just yesterday. But for more than a week, Bob, my shelves were all but empty. I'm the victim of a freighting war between the two big freighting outfits, John Hunton's firm and Territorial Freighting."

Pryor looked puzzled. "Usually merchants profit by a freighting war," he said. "Rates are cut, and so the men paying for the hauling save money."

Eberts nodded agreement. "In an ordinary fight between rival outfits that happens. But this isn't a rate-cutting fight. In fact, it's a one-sided fight. Territorial is a crooked outfit, and it's making war on Hunton. John Hunton is an honest man, and other than trying to protect his wagons, he's not fighting back."

"Protect his wagons?" the Rio Kid said. "You mean—?"

"That's it, Bob." Eberts nodded. "Hunton's rigs are being raided on the trail. By masked riders. Hunton can't prove that these raiders are Territorial men, but they are without a doubt. Let me give you an example of how it hurts me and the other merchants. . . . A month ago I had Hunton's firm pick up a carload of small wood stoves at the railroad in Cheyenne. The stoves cost me more than two thousand dollars. The wagon hauling the shipment was jumped at Red Rock, and driven over a cliff. Cast iron stoves break easily, Bob, and the cliff was about three hundred feet high. I managed to salvage only a half dozen of my stoves."

"And you had to take a loss of more than two thousand dollars?"

"That's right."

"And John Hunton doesn't insure freight?"

"Not any longer," Eberts said gloomily. "He can't afford to. His losses in wagons and mules are pushing him to the wall, which is just what Territorial wants to accomplish. A week after my stoves were turned into a lot of scrap iron, another shipment of mine, miscellaneous merchandise, was lost. The raiders killed the shotgun guard John Hunton put on the wagon. They tied up the muleskinner. They drove off with the wagon and my goods. I lost more than a thousand dollars on that shipment. You can see, Bob, that I can't afford such losses. I'll be pushed into bankruptcy!"

"Or forced to let Territorial do your hauling."

"Territorial hauled in the big shipment I received yesterday."

"But you don't like dealing with that outfit?"

"I don't like it," Eberts said flatly. "And I can't keep paying their rates. Territorial is charging five times as much as Hunton. If anybody complains, he's told, 'You have to pay for *safe* delivery, if you want delivery at all.' It means I've got to mark up every item of my stock, and that's not fair to my customers."

"These masked raiders, Steve. Could they be the Buckskin Militia?"

"There's been rumors that they might be. But I blame Territorial."

"Who's the boss of Territorial?"

"A tinhorn named Russ Mardin. He has a tough trail boss named Jake Riordan. Mardin is the brains, Riordan the brawn."

The Rio Kid nodded. "I've met Riordan," he said. "I'll make it my business to meet Mr. Mardin. And I'd like to talk with John Hunton, too. Do these men have their separate headquarters in Deadwood?"

"Mardin does," Eberts told him. "He

has an office and a wagon yard just a short piece along the street from here. Hunton's headquarters are in Cheyenne at present, but he's here in Deadwood now. Hunton is either at the Walker Hotel or at his local wagon yard. You want me to go along and introduce you to them?"

PRYOR said he didn't.

"Maybe it'll be best if no one knows at first that I'm here to help you get your freight shipments through—safely and at fair rates," he said, and smiled faintly. "That's what you want of me, isn't it, Steve?"

Eberts' amiable look returned. "I was sure you'd help me, Captain," he said, holding out his hand. "A man can always count on you."

The Rio Kid shook hands with him, then turned to the door. Suddenly he swung back.

"By the way, Steve; I stepped into a store across the street by mistake. Owned by the Randalls."

Eberts nodded. "Dick and Virginia Randall," he said. "Fine people, but proud. And not cut out for business. I suppose you noticed their stock." He shook his head sadly. "A crooked wholesaler in Cheyenne unloaded a lot of cheap merchandise on them, most of it unsalable here. What little good stuff they had at the start sold within a day or two after they opened. That was three weeks ago. Since then they haven't received any new shipments. I tried to give Virginia"—he spoke her name with unconscious feeling—"some advice, but I was too blunt and she resented it. I think they're at the end of their rope, financially. It's too bad. Dick has a bad leg and his health isn't good. He can't hold down any job that's at all strenuous. I don't know what they'll do."

"Proud, are they?"

"They're Southerners."

"That doesn't make them any different than the rest of us, Steve."

"It does. They come from a family that was rich before the War. The Randall family owned a big plantation and a lot of slaves. It was an aristocratic family, Bob, and that makes Ginny and Dick different."

"There's no way to help them?"

"I offered to help them. I was told by Virginia that the Randalls can't accept charity."

"You in love with the girl, Steve?"

"Why . . . now, what gives you such an idea?"

The Rio Kid chuckled. "Maybe I can find a way to help the Randalls," he said "at the same time I'm trying to find a way to help you. I'll see you later, Steve. If my partner, Celestino Mireles, shows up here, tell him to wait for me."

He left the office, went through the cluttered store room, stepped out into Deadwood's busy main street. He halted outside the doorway of the Emporium to roll and light a cigarette, and to think. He had casually agreed to help Steve Eberts, but now it occurred to him that getting himself involved in a war between two big competing freighting companies was far from a casual matter. It meant meddling, and meddlers often found more trouble than they bargained for!

The first move, he decided, was to meet John Hunton and attempt to learn from him about the masked raiders who were attacking his freight outfits. The Rio Kid had never met Hunton, but he had heard men in Cheyenne speak of him. John Hunton was a freighting magnate; in fact, he had a monopoly on the freighting business before the Black Hills gold rush. Prior to the rush, the only hauling had been to the military posts and the Indian agencies, and Hunton had had things his own way. The Territorial Freighting Company, now out to smash Hunton's firm, was a new outfit.

The Rio Kid went to Hunton's local wagon yard, but his man wasn't there. He tried the Walker Hotel, and missed Hunton by a few minutes. Leaving the hotel, he sighted a familiar figure striding along the street. A tall, strikingly handsome, well dressed figure. A figure that would have stood out in any crowd in any place. If there was a man who could give information about the under-

handed goings-on of a camp, it was this man. The Rio Kid started after him, but he was delayed by a string of wagons coming along the street. "Bill!" he called "You, Bill Hickok!"

The man didn't hear him.

When he ducked around the wagons, "Wild Bill" Hickok was entering the Red Tent Saloon. The Rio Kid headed for the place, moving fast, anxious to again meet Hickok, one of the most famous of all Westerners.

THE walls and ceiling of the Red Tent might be canvas, but the interior was no different from any more solidly constructed saloon. A long bar ran along the right side, and a row of tables and chairs along the other. At the rear were gambling lay-outs, to one side, a corner platform for musicians, and a cleared space for dancing.

At this hour, early afternoon, none of the dealers, musicians or percentage girls were in evidence. They would not put in an appearance until evening, when the miners trooped in from the diggings. But there were a dozen men scattered along the bar for drinks, a few more at tables. When the Rio Kid entered, Wild Bill Hickok was already seated at a table, alone, shuffling a deck of cards for a game of solitaire.

Sometimes Hickok was called "The Magnificent," and he came close to being that. He was six feet tall, seemed somehow to loom far taller, and was perfectly proportioned. He was wide of shoulder, lean of waist, with hands too small and shapely, it seemed, for the fighter he was. He had a full mustache and golden-brown hair worn so long it touched his shoulders.

He wore a flat-crowned, wide-brimmed black Stetson and a finely tailored frock coat. His shirt was snowy white, his black string tie without a wrinkle. His boots were of expensive calf, and highly polished. He was a steely-eyed man whose eyes were sometimes blue, sometimes gray.

Hickok looked up sharply as Pryor turned in his direction. He was quickly

CELESTINO MIRELES

alert, gunfighter fashion. He relaxed, smiled broadly.

"Captain Pryor!" he exclaimed. "The Rio Kid!"

The famous gunfighter shoved back his chair, rose, thrust out a friendly hand. He seemed genuinely glad to see Bob Pryor.

"Haven't seen you since that wild night in Hays City when we broke up the Durango wild bunch," he said. "What brings you to Deadwood, Captain?"

"A job of trouble-shooting."

"Still the same Rio Kid, eh?"

"A man can't change his nature, Bill."

"That's true enough," Hickok said. "Sit down. Tell me about it."

The Rio Kid signaled to the bartender, ordered drinks, and paid for them when they came. Less of a drinking man than Hickok, he was surprised that his friend hadn't offered to set them up. Then he noticed that although Hickok looked immaculate as ever upon first glance, actually the man's coat was threadbare in spots, and his spotlessly clean shirt was frayed at collar and cuffs. He recalled then having heard in Cheyenne that Hickok, when in that town early in the spring, had been broke. It appeared that Wild Bill was still down on his luck, so he couldn't

afford to buy drinks.

"Here's to your success in whatever brings you to Deadwood," Hickok said, lifting his glass. They downed their drinks, then Hickok said: "Want to tell me about it? Or is it a secret?"

"I'll let you in on it," the Rio Kid said. "I intended to tell you, thinking that you might be able to give me some information. You heard of the freighting war?"

Hickok nodded, interested.

"This fight between Hunton's firm and Territorial Freighting is hurting the Deadwood merchants," Pryor declared. "It's making the citizens of Deadwood pay more than they should for the necessities of life. One of the merchants here is a friend of mine. Steve Eberts, who owns the Emporium. He sent for me, and I've promised to see what can be done about getting his merchandise delivered safely at fair rates."

"That's a big order. Even for the Rio Kid."

"I figure so, too. So far, I don't even know how or where to start."

"You know any of the men involved?"

The Rio Kid said he had run up against Jake Riordan. "A tough hombre," he said. "But I don't know John Hunton. Or Russ Mardin."

"Hunton is a square-shooter," Hickok told him. "Mardin is shrewd as they come, and maybe as crooked as a dog's hind leg. There's been a lot of talk that Mardin is out to smash Hunton's outfit, so that Territorial Freighting can handle all the hauling into the Black Hills. But it's not been proved. Hunton's wagons are being jumped by masked riders, and the grapevine gossip has it that these masked hombres are the Buckskin Militia. You've heard of that organization?"

Pryor smiled thinly. "I've met up with a bunch of these Buckskins."

Hickok looked curious but asked no questions.

"Talk is," he went on, "that the Buckskins—the head ones, at least—are freighters who have a grudge against Hunton. Some bullwhackers and muleskinners he fired for stealing off the wagons they were driving. They're supposed to be working off a grudge by raiding Hunton outfits on the trail."

"What do you think, Bill?"

"I've no opinion."

"The Buckskin Militia could be tied up with Territorial Freighting?"

HICKOK shook his head, and shrugged.

"It's possible, but it'll be hard to prove," he said. "But if those two outfits are tied up together, you're going to have a tough proposition on your hands when you buck the combination. It would be tough enough handling either one of them alone." Wild Bill fumbled in his pockets, seeking something. He came up with a short cigar butt, lighted it rather sheepishly. "Left my cigars in my quarters," he murmured.

The Rio Kid reached out, lay a friendly hand on the man's arm. "No need to hide anything from an old friend, Bill," he said. "You down on your luck?"

"Well—"

"Need a stake?"

"Pride keeps me from saying 'yes,'" Hickok said, smiling dourly. "I'm considering a couple deals at the moment, and I may make a good connection any day now. In the meantime, I'll get along." He stared at the smoldering end of his hoarded cigar butt. "Funny about a man with a reputation, Bob. He can't just take any job, once he's famous. He can't take a shovel and go panning for gold like a boomer, either. Right away other men talk and look down on him." He smiled again. "Or maybe it's that pride of mine."

The Rio Kid nodded, understandingly. Then he had an idea.

"Why don't you come see John Hunton with me?" he asked. "He should have a man like you in his outfit, now that he's got bad trouble. You could be trouble-shooter for his firm, if he likes the idea. I'll drop a hint to him."

"I hate the idea of begging."

"It wouldn't be begging," the Rio Kid said earnestly. "It'd be a business deal.

You have your services to offer at a fair price. And it looks to me as though John Hunton can't afford not to buy those services. Let's have another drink, then look up Hunton."

CHAPTER V

"Calamity Jane"

A HALF-DOZEN men came into the saloon in a group. Or rather, five men and a woman. But the woman talked like a man, for she was the famous "Calamity Jane." She also dressed like a man. Calamity's trade was that of muleskinner, and she had a reputation for cussing at a team of jugheads with as much fervor as any man. Now her powerful voice lifted the moment she entered the tent saloon.

"Dig in your pockets, boys," she announced. "I'm passing the hat!"

"For yourself, Calamity?" a man at the bar asked, jokingly.

There was laughter.

The woman held her broad-brimmed hat in one hand. A blacksnake whip was coiled in her other hand. Suddenly the whip lashed out, cracked like a pistol shot.

"No time for joshing, gents," she said. "Hank Givens got hurt in an accident at his diggings. He'd got a busted leg, and he'll be laid up for a long time. I'm collecting a purse for Hank, and I'll use this blacksnake on any galoot too stingy to contribute. Dust or specie, gents. Anything that shines or glitters is welcome!"

The Rio Kid grinned, glanced at his companion. Wild Bill Hickok looked embarrassed.

Pryor took a gold coin from his pocket, slipped it to Hickok under the table.

"A loan," he whispered. "Pay it back later."

Calamity Jane reached the table at which the Rio Kid and Wild Bill Hickok sat. She greeted Hickok heartily, then recognizing his companion, cried:

"Darned if it ain't the Rio Kid!" She placed her hat with the dust and coins it contained upon the table, thrust out a hand for Pryor to grasp. "Good to see you again, Cap'n," she said, and there was nothing shy about this amazing woman who had made her own way on the frontier since orphaned as a child of eight. She winked at Hickok. "Handsome as ever, ain't he?"

Hickok agreed, dropping his contribution into the hat.

Pryor donated a ten-dollar gold piece, and he saw that the hat was already half filled with dust, nuggets and specie. Calamity Jane, who had been born Martha Jane Canary, might shame her sex with her rawhide toughness, but it was an exterior toughness. Beneath it, Calamity had a tender heart. Her concern for the injured miner was proof of that.

The Rio Kid had a sudden idea. "Calamity," he said, "while you're in the mood to do good deeds, I'd like to ask a favor of you."

"Shoot!"

"You know Dick and Virginia Randall?"

Calamity's sun-darkened face was thoughtful. "Those two uppity Johnny Rebs who own the store? Sure, I know 'em. Why?"

He quickly told her how the Randalls had been cheated by the Cheyenne wholesaler, and how their store lacked customers.

"They're mighty nice people," he said. "They deserve some help. They mustn't know we're helping them, though. They're proud, and they won't accept charity. But there's a way we can give them a hand to make their store a going concern."

Calamity was interested. "Talk on, Cap'n," she ordered.

"Deadwood's rich," he said. "Gold is flowing like water. My idea is that if you'd spread word, Calamity, asking everybody who can afford it to just buy one item at the Randalls' store—"

Calamity slapped him on the back.

"Got it!" she said. "It's a good idea. I'll start drumming up business for the Randalls right now!"

She pulled a chair from the table, climbed up on it. She cracked her blacksnake whip to command attention. More men had drifted in, and a couple of the Red Tent's percentage girls also had come in. Everybody turned toward Calamity. "Listen, folks!" she said loudly. "The Rio Kid here has just told me about a couple of Deadwood citizens that need some help. They're the Randalls, who have the store close by. We can't collect a purse for 'em, like we're doin' for Hank Givens. No, siree. We've got to help 'em without 'em knowing."

She paused, drew a deep breath. "Now, I'm spreading word for every decent-hearted Deadwood citizen to go to the Randall store and buy something. The Randalls ain't got anything in stock anybody needs, but we're all going to make a purchase from 'em—or Calamity Jane here is going to know the reason why!"

There was laughter, but it wasn't mocking. The proposition appealed to the sense of humor of these rough men and the two worldly-wise percentage girls.

"Everybody here make a visit to the store," Calamity Jane went on, "and spread word around town. And no backsliding, either!"

There was more laughter, and spoken promises to do as Calamity Jane requested. Then one of four men who had just entered and had listened to the woman from by the tent entrance sneered:

"A fool idea. Why should we buy something we don't need just because the Rio Kid says so?"

The speaker was Jake Riordan.

Like Calamity Jane, Riordan carried a blacksnake whip. Many freighters were more expert with a whip than with a gun, and so kept it handy in case a weapon was needed. Two of the men with Riordan were tough-visaged freighters. The other man was also a burly sort, but clean-shaven, except for a neatly trimmed mustache, and well-dressed.

"That's Russ Mardin, head of Territorial Freighting, Bob," Wild Bill Hickok said, low-voiced.

The Rio Kid glanced at the well-tailored man. Russ Mardin was formidable-looking. He was shrewd-eyed, thin-lipped, florid of face. Bob Pryor had met Mardin's breed before, so he didn't need to be told that Russ Mardin was inordinately ambitious and wholly ruthless in furthering his ambitions. Jake Riordan might be hot-headed and a trouble-hunter, but his boss was cool of nerve and level in his thinking. Mardin would be a gambler by nature, but he would hold his cards close to his vest. And he would not only want the odds in his favor in any game, but rig them in his favor.

Riordan was on the prod. However, remembering his encounter with the Rio Kid on the trail. He stepped forward, looking straight at him.

"I don't like it," he said harshly, loudly, for everybody to hear. "I don't like a stranger coming here and telling us how to do things in Deadwood. Me, I don't like meddlers!"

The Rio Kid rose, a mirthless smile on his lips.

"Maybe I don't care much what you don't like, Jake," he drawled.

"You will, mister," Riordan retorted. "You'll care plenty when I'm done with you. You ain't got that Mexican backing you up with guns now. Get up, hombre. Get up and take what's coming to you, if you ain't as yellow as those stripes down your pants legs!"

Riordan's whip struck out, catching the Rio Kid around the ankles.

Some men were wizards with a blacksnake, and Jake Riordan was one of them. As the long whip wound about the Rio Kid's ankles, Riordan gave it a violent jerk. The Rio Kid, caught off balance, felt his feet going out from under him. But he flung his body forward as he fell, lunging at Riordan. He managed to wrap his arms about Riordan's legs at the knees. He toppled the freighter-boss over backwards.

Riordan roared a startled oath, kicked free, jumped up. He tried to bring the whip into play again, but the Rio Kid was too close and moving too fast. The Rio Kid slammed jabbing blows to Riordan's middle. The freighter staggered, retreated, and was crowded by the fast-moving man in Army blue. The Rio Kid suddenly shifted his attack, battering Riordan about the face, then he grabbed the whip. He tore it from Riordan's grasp, flung it aside. "Bare fists, Jake," he said. "Come on, if you've got the nerve!"

Riordan cursed with rage. He ducked his head, hunched his thick shoulders, and rushed. The Rio Kid sidestepped, slammed a right to Riordan's head. But the hardcase pivoted, rammed in against the Rio Kid. He got in one blow at last, a hard punch to the Rio Kid's jaw. The Rio Kid staggered. His brain reeled, his vision blurred. Suddenly he was tripped from behind, by one of Riordan's companions. He fell hard, lay dazed.

Riordan yelled gleefully, leapt forward to use his boots on his fallen enemy. He got in one kick, to the ribs, but on the second attempt at booting, his foot was caught and held by the Rio Kid. Heaving to his feet, the Rio Kid twisted and pulled at Riordan's foot. He toppled the man over, sprawled him on his back where Riordan lay groaning.

The two tough-visaged freighters who had waited with Russ Mardin, the one who had tripped the Rio Kid and the other one, rushed forward to give Riordan a hand. "Hold it, hombres!" a voice commanded. "One more step will take you to Boot Hill!"

The pair froze, for it was Wild Bill Hickok talking.

HICKOK had them covered with both his guns.

"Obliged to you, Bill," the Rio Kid panted. "Keep them off me until I finish with this loud-mouthed braggart." He faced Riordan again, who had rolled over and got to his hands and knees. "You got enough, Jake?"

Riordan swore again. "Enough nothing!" he growled. "I'm just getting warmed up!" He was preparing to rush again.

"Maybe you two hombres haven't had enough," a new arrival said angrily, "but I have." He was a lean-bodied, sallow-faced man in a black suit, a flowered vest, and a pink shirt with a black string tie. "This is my saloon, gents, and it's a business establishment, not a prize-ring."

The Red Tent's owner was unarmed, but his two bartenders flanked him, one to a side, and each held a sawed-off shotgun.

"Let them finish it, Hansen," Russ Mardin said. "It's a grudge fight."

"Sure," Wild Bill Hickok added, "Let them get it out of their systems."

The Rio Kid had heard of this saloonman, "Gamblin' Ed" Hansen. He showed up at every boom town in the West, sooner or later, to operate a combination saloon, gambling-house, and

[*Turn page*]

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dancehall. He was a dour, funereal-looking man with beady black eyes and slicked-down black hair. Gamblin' Ed eyed Jake Riordan and he eyed the Rio Kid.

"If I know fighters, which I do," he said, "these two are evenly matched. It'd end up in a draw, sure." He glanced around, a sly look in his eyes. "Of course, Riordan outweighs the Rio Kid and looks a lot tougher. On the other hand, Pryor has more brains—"

Riordan was on his feet now. "Cut the talk, Hansen," he growled, "and call off your barkeeps. I'll show you who's the better man!"

Gamblin' Ed Hansen ignored him. "My idea is that the whole of Deadwood has got a right to see this grudge fight—and to bet on it," he said. "There's a lot out back of the Red Tent, plenty of room for a crowd. We'll rig up some lanterns and torches, and have the fight tonight. What do you say, gents?"

Russ Mardin answered for Riordan. "We agree," he said.

Wild Bill Hickok caught the Rio Kid's eye, winked. "We agree, too," he said. "The Rio Kid will show up at eight o'clock, sharp!"

It seemed a little loco to the Rio Kid, but he didn't object.

He gave Hickok a curious look once they left the Red Tent.

"How come you fell for that?" he asked. "Hansen just wants to do some heavy betting on the outcome of the fight. It wouldn't surprise me if he ropes off that lot and charges admission. I could have settled Riordan's hash, back there, in a couple of minutes."

Hickok stroked his handsome mustache, a sure sign that he was puzzled.

"There was more behind Riordan's jumping you," he said, "than his being sore because of what happened between you and him on the trail. If it had been only a grudge bothering that hardcase, Russ Mardin would have called him off. I've got a suspicion that Mardin wanted—and still wants—Riordan to give you a good beating."

"Why? You're a jump ahead of me."

"They're onto you. They know or guess why you're in Deadwood."

"How could they? Nobody knows but Steve Eberts and you."

Hickok frowned over that, stroked at his mustache. "It could be that one of Eberts' clerks listened to the talk you and Eberts had, and tipped off Mardin. Or, more likely, it's because of your reputation. You're famous for taking sides in trouble like this freighting war, and Rus Mardin may have just jumped to the right conclusion."

The Rio Kid nodded to that, for it seemed logical.

Too, Russ Mardin may have heard that the Rio Kid had been trying to locate John Hunton, his competitor, soon after hitting town. Mardin could have learned that from one of the men at Hunton's wagon yard, for Mardin no doubt had spies in John Hunton's outfit, or from the proprietor at the Walker House. Yes, Russ Mardin may have jumped to the right conclusion about the Rio Kid.

"Riordan is a holy terror in a brawl," Hickok went on, "and Mardin may count on him to cripple you so badly that you won't be able to interfere in the freighting war. But Mr. Mardin is due for a shock. Riordan's never come up against a man like you."

"Thanks for your confidence in me," the Rio Kid said, rather drily. "Let's see if Hunton has returned."

CHAPTER VI

A Challenge

IN THE wagon yard at the rear of the buildings fronting on the main street, were a blacksmith shop, a shed in which a wagonwright worked, a feed barn, a big corral, and a shacklike office. A clerk was working at a desk in the office. John Hunton, the freighting magnate, was also there.

He was a tall, lean man with a full

mustache and a spade beard, an astute-looking man. He knew Wild Bill Hickok, of course, and Hickok introduced the Rio Kid. Hunton offered his hand.

"Glad to know you, sir," he said. "I've heard quite a lot about you. What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"Could we talk to you in private, Mr. Hunton?" Pryor asked, glancing meaningfully at the busy clerk.

Hunton nodded and spoke to the clerk who left his desk and went outside. Hunton invited his visitors to be seated.

"What's on your mind, Rio Kid?" he asked.

Pryor told him how he happened to be in Deadwood, saying that Steve Eberts had sent for him. He told about his encounter with the masked riders on the trail, and his two run-ins with Jake Riordan.

"Riordan was on the trail with a six-wagon outfit," he said, "but left the outfit and rode on to Deadwood. He reached here shortly after I arrived. He had a meeting with his boss, Russ Mardin, then he and Mardin and a couple of tough hands looked me up. Riordan picked a fight with me. It looks as though the Territorial crowd suspects that I'm here to—well, to look into its activities." He smiled slightly. "Which I am."

"The masked riders were members of the Buckskin Militia," Hunton said, frowning. "Their flogging that Army officer is proof of that. But the important part of the affair—to me, at least—is the Buckskins being on friendly terms with the Territorial crowd."

"You didn't suspect that?"

"I had no proof of it."

"And now?" Pryor asked.

Hunton's face was grave. "It's like this," he said. "I'm convinced that Russ Mardin would like to squeeze me out of the freighting business, so that his Territorial outfit can have a monopoly in this part of the country. His motive is clear enough. Once he controls all hauling to the gold fields, he can hike his freight rates sky-high. He can bleed Deadwood and the other camps white, simply by controlling the flow of provisions and supplies that keep the camps alive. He would have thousands of men under his thumb, as it were.

"But I can't prove that he orders the attacks on my wagons. And without proof I can't appeal to the Army for help. Deadwood has elected a sheriff, but he has no authority out on the trails. And the Army is too occupied with Indian troubles to do more than patrol the freighting routes. The soldiers can't guard my wagons, and they've had no success in dealing with the Buckskin Militia."

Hunton rose from his chair, began pacing the floor.

"I accept your word for it," he went on, "that the Militia and Territorial are on friendly terms. But the military authorities wouldn't consider one man's word as concrete evidence."

"A question, Mr. Hunton," said the Rio Kid. "Are you convinced that the Buckskins are pulling the raids on your wagons?"

Hunton halted his pacing, stared.

"The raiders could be men in Russ Mardin's employ posing as Buckskins?" the Rio Kid suggested.

Hunton shook his head. "No," he said definitely, "the raiders are members of the Buckskin Militia. I haven't the slightest doubt of that. You see, I caught three of my employes stealing valuable freight. I fired them, and they told me to my face that they'd get even with me. It was shortly after that the first raid on my wagons occurred."

"You gave the Army the names of those three men?"

"Yes. But the Army hasn't been able to apprehend them."

"What are their names, sir?"

"Matt Boland, Mitch Wall, and Jim Robles."

Pryor glanced at the silent Wild Bill Hickok. "That would be a job for you, Bill—locating those three," he said. He caught Hickok's nod, then turned back to John Hunton. "Why not put Hickok on as a trouble-shooter, Mr. Hunton? He's an experienced peace officer."

Hunton's face lighted. "That's a good

idea," he said. He turned to Hickok. "I'm offering you a job as trouble-shooter, Bill. Will you accept?"

Hickok nodded. "Be glad to help you out, John," he said.

THE Rio Kid concealed a smile. He was really lending folks a helping hand here in Deadwood; first the Randalls and now Wild Bill Hickok. He hoped that he could do the same for Steve Eberts and, of course, John Hunton.

"The way I see it," he said, rising from his chair, "the first move is to find unshakable evidence that the Buckskin Militia and Territorial Freighting are in cahoots. Once we have that evidence, we can deal with Russ Mardin, and smash his scheme to gain control of all the freighting to the Black Hills. Then, with the Buckskins having lost Territorial's support, we'll find a way to round them up."

"It's not going to be easy," Hunton said, somewhat gloomily.

"It may be easier than you think," the Rio Kid assured. "I've a notion that Jake Riordan is the intermediary between Russ Mardin and the Militia, and Riordan is making the mistake of crowding me. . . . I'll leave you gentlemen now to talk over the deal you've made."

He nodded to each in turn and returning to the street, looked for Territorial's wagon yard and office. He intended to have a talk with Russ Mardin.

As he passed the Randalls' little store, he saw customers entering and leaving the box-sized frame building. Those emerging carried purchases. He smiled to himself. Calamity Jane had done a good job of sending business the Randalls' way.

Pryor saw Steve Eberts in the doorway of his store. Eberts' round, boyish face wore a puzzled look as he watched the flow of trade to the opposite store. His shrewd merchant's mind told Steve that the sudden spurt of business there just wasn't according to the rules of trade. Eberts was so intent upon the phenomenon that he didn't even notice the Rio Kid walking past.

At the wagon yard of the Territorial Freighting Company, Pryor found Russ Mardin alone in the office. Mardin was working at a desk, a cigar in his lips. He looked up, smiled blandly, no surprise showing on his florid face. He leaned back in his chair.

"Come to ask me to call off the fight?" he asked mockingly.

Bob Pryor smiled, did not otherwise answer. After a moment Russ Mardin fidgeted. "Look," he growled. "I'm a busy man. If you've got something of importance to say, say it. If not, clear out."

"Just want to ask you a question," the Rio Kid drawled. "Is Jake Riordan a member of the Buckskin Militia?"

"How should I know?" Mardin said sharply, but the annoyance quickly left his face and he looked his usual bland self. But his eyes were wary. "Just what are you getting at?"

"Can't you guess, Mardin?"

"I'm no good at guessing games."

"The Buckskins have been raiding Hunton wagons," the Rio Kid reminded. "Wrecking them. Looting them. Criminal acts, Mardin. I happen to know that Riordan is friendly with the Buckskin Militia. It occurred to me that he might be a memebr of that organization."

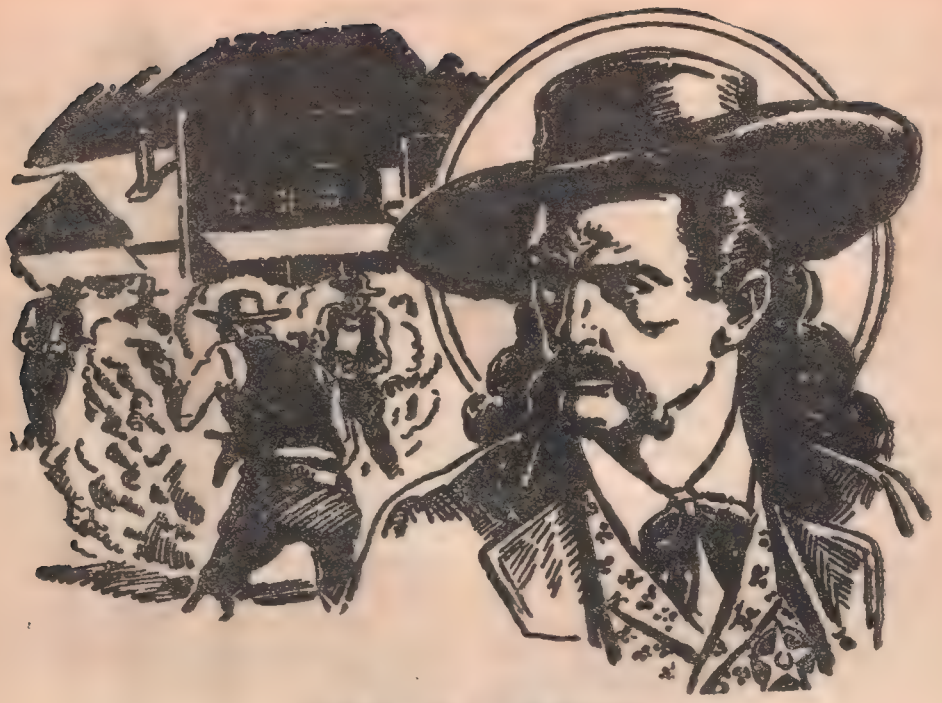
"If he is, he's keeping it a secret," Mardin retorted. "Personally, I don't think he is a member. In fact, if I suspected it I wouldn't have him working for me."

"You mean that?"

"I don't talk just to hear the sound of my voice."

Pryor smiled again. "I'm taking you up on that, Mardin," he said. "If I prove to you that Jake Riordan is a Buckskin, you'll fire him. Right?"

A scowl gathered on Mardin's florid face. "Sure, I'd fire him," he said. "If I was convinced he's a member of the Buckskin Militia. I'd be a fool to keep him on, in such a case. It would look as though I was mixed up with that outfit." He studied the Rio Kid for a long moment, clearly not liking what he saw. "I'd like to know, however, what business it is of yours."



WILD BILL HICKOK

WILD BILL HICKOK, born James Butler Hickok, in LaSalle County, Illinois, May 27, 1837, spent his boyhood on a farm. He went to Kansas in '55, when Kansas was fighting the Border Ruffians, and became the bodyguard of General Lane. He served as constable at Monticello, then tried ranching. At Leavenworth, in '59, Hickok got his start as a gunfighter, killing five members of a gang that jumped him.

Hickok was a wagon driver on the Santa Fe Trail. Later he was a stagecoach jehu on the Ox-Bow Route. In 1860, he almost lost a fight to a grizzly bear, being badly mauled. Recovering he was sent to the Rock Creek Stage Station where he gained notoriety by killing Dave McCandles. He earned his sobriquet "Wild Bill" at Leavenworth upon clearing a bunch of toughs from a saloon.

Hickok served as a wagon-master for the Union forces at Fort Leavenworth, and scouted for Federal troops in Indian Territory. After the War, he served as a deputy marshal at Fort Riley. He was also a scout, courier, and guide until late 1868, when Wild Bill the Scout became Wild Bill the Marshal.

He was a fighting peace officer. He was marshal of Hays City and of Abilene, and always in trouble. He toured with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, then drifted to Colorado and Wyoming. He was killed by Jack McCall, an ex-buffalo hunter, on August 2, 1876.

Wild Bill Hickok has become a legend, and now it is difficult to analyze his true character. He was considered a villain as well as a hero, and certainly he was human. A dude, a sport, a gambler, a ladies' man—but most of all Wild Bill Hickok was a gun-fighter of the Old Wild West.

"I've just had a talk with John Hunton."

"You working for him?"

"No."

"He didn't bring you here, as a trouble-shooter?"

"Hunton knows that the Rio Kid doesn't hire on with any outfit," Pryor stated. "He made me no offer, just gave me information."

HE WAS watching Mardin closely, but the man had an unreadable poker face. The Rio Kid sensed, however, that the boss of Territorial Freighting was puzzled. He decided to give the man a jolt. "But Hunton's hired a troubleshooter," he said.

"So?" Mardin tried to be casual, but couldn't conceal his curiosity. "Who's the hombre Hunton hired?"

"Wild Bill Hickok."

"Well, he picked a good man," said Mardin, still being casual. "Just why are you mixing in this game?"

"Because of a friend of mine," the Rio Kid said. "Steve Eberts, who owns the Emporium. Eberts is tired of losing freight shipments on Hunton's wagons, and he's sick of paying the profiteering rates Territorial charges. He asked me to see that he gets safe delivery on his shipments at fair rates."

"Eberts should be darned glad to pay Territorial's rates," Mardin retorted. "Those rates are going to stay high, Pryor, because Territorial makes delivery. I'm going to charge all the traffic will bear. That's business. It's legitimate business."

"It would be legitimate but for the attacks on Hunton's wagons."

"For your information, I have nothing to do with those attacks. The Buckskin Militia is to blame. And I'm not at fault for Hunton's not being able to come to terms with the Buckskins."

"You'll admit it looks queer—Hunton's wagons being raided while yours are not molested."

"I've never had trouble with any members of the Militia."

"You're sure that's the only reason your wagons aren't raided?"

"What other reason would there be?"

"I'll give it to you straight, Mardin," the Rio Kid said. "It looks as though Territorial Freighting and the Buckskin Militia are in cahoots."

Mardin roared an oath, enraged.

"Get out of my office, you accursed meddler!" he bellowed. "I won't stand for any man coming onto my property to insult me! Get out! Get out before I throw you out!"

The Rio Kid smiled faintly. "Sure," he drawled. "Sure, Mardin, I'll get out. But if I find evidence that things are as they look, I'll be back. Then, Mr. Mardin, you can try to throw me out."

He turned to the door. Behind him, Russ Mardin was swearing bitterly.

A steady stream of customers was still flowing in and out of the Randall store. Steve Eberts was still neglecting his own business to watch the rush of trade across the street. He no longer looked puzzled for he'd heard about the speech Calamity Jane had made at the Red Tent.

"I wouldn't have thought of such a stunt," he said, and gave Pryor a hearty handshake. "By unloading their no-good stock, the Randalls will be able to obtain the right kind of merchandise and stay in business."

"And that'll give you a chance to spark Virginia, eh?" the Rio Kid said.

"Not a chance," Eberts said, reddening. "That girl won't let me get within shouting distance. I sure got off to a bad start with her." He looked glum. "We had words—angry words, and a lot of them—after I offered to help her and Dick. I was to blame, I guess. I let Virginia see I pitied them, and that hurt her pride. I . . . Well, I got mad and said that she was just like a Johnny Reb, too proud for her own good. She wouldn't even let me apologize."

"She'll forgive and forget now that she and Dick haven't so much to worry about," Pryor said. "Did my partner show up?"

"Just a minute ago," Eberts replied. "He took your horses around back to my lean-to barn." He forgot the Randalls. "Is it true what everybody's saying—you're going to fight Jake Riordan?"

"It's true."

"I don't like it, Bob. Riordan is a dirty fighter."

"It can't be helped, Steve. Riordan picked the fight."

"Why? What's he up to?"

Pryor shrugged. "I just told Russ Mardin why I'm in Deadwood," he said. "Mardin and Riordan were a jump ahead of me. They figured that I was here to mix in the freighting war. So they decided that Riordan had better put me out of the way in a hurry. Riordan tried at the Red Tent, but Gamblin' Ed Hansen stopped the fight. It'll be finished tonight—my way, I hope."

Eberts shook his head, worried. "I saw Riordan whip a man once," he said gloomily. "A man who outweighed him by forty pounds. A miner named Shane. Shane came close to being killed, and he's still crippled. I don't like it. If anything should happen to you, it'd be on my conscience."

The Rio Kid smiled.

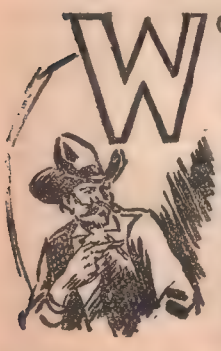
"Quit worrying, Steve," he said. "I'm in this thing up to the hilt, and I wouldn't back out now."

Celestino Mireles came around the corner of the building. A broad grin came to his hawklike face as he saw his trail-mate. "General," he said "I hear talk. You are going to fight Senor Riordan, eh?" He caught Pryor's nod, then went on, "Everybody ees excited. At the feed corral, there was betting. A miner wagered ten ounces of Deadwood gold on the Rio Kid, General!"

"Ten ounces?" said the Rio Kid, chuckling. "Well, I'll have to see that he doesn't lose his dust!"

CHAPTER VII

The Fight in the Wagon Yard



WORD of the proposed fight spread through Deadwood and to the diggings, and the miners quit panning for gold early that day. They came into town, crowding the main street, filling the saloons and eating-places, and excitement ran high. Betting was heavy, and Gamblin' Ed Hansen, over at the Red Tent, was taking all bets. Despite his having claimed that the two opponents were evenly matched and that the fight would probably end in a draw, Gamblin' Ed was putting his money on burly Jake Riordan.

The miners' dust was put on the Rio Kid. Not only because they knew of his reputation, but because they hated Jake Riordan. It seemed that more miners than the crippled Shane had felt the power of Riordan's fists—and boots. The miners of Deadwood wanted to see Riordan whipped more than they wanted to win bets. Gamblin' Ed Hansen had been aware of their hatred for Riordan when he had suggested the fight.

By sundown, men were coming in from neighboring camps and diggings. Riders had sped to carry notice of the fight to those places. Deadwood began to overflow with rowdy, excited men.

The Rio Kid had supper in the back-room of the Emporium. Steve Eberts, Celestino Mireles, and Wild Bill Hickok were with him. Hickok, now trouble-shooter for John Hunton's freighting firm, at two hundred a month, told Pryor that Hunton would be at the fight with some of his freighters.

"You'll have enough friends there to see that it's a fair fight," Hickok said.

At a quarter of eight, just as they were about to start for the appointed place, Calamity Jane came rushing into the Eberts store. Calamity wasn't as easily upset as women who led a sheltered life, but she was clearly excited.

"Gents, I just got a tip from a friend of mine," she said breathlessly, as she burst into the back room. "A number of Buckskins have drifted into town. They're mixing—how do you call it, incognito?—with the crowd!"

"That's to be expected, Calamity," Bob Pryor said. "Why worry about it?"

"Nell's bells, Cap'n! You don't know what those Buckskins are up to!"

"What are they up to, Calamity?"

"They're going to kill you if you win the fight!"

Wild Bill Hickok swore softly. Steve Eberts groaned.

"Maybe ees true, General!" Celestino Mireles said anxiously.

Pryor frowned. He looked at Calamity Jane. "Where'd you hear that?" he asked. "From this friend of yours?"

The frontier woman nodded jerkily, man-fashion. "From him, and from a percentage girl at the Red Tent," she said. "Both told me that the Buckskins made that threat. They're putting their money on Riordan, like most of the freighters, and they're going to be plumb mad—mad enough to carry out their threat—if they lose."

The Rio Kid thought it over, then began to smile.

"Looks to me like a bluff," he said. "You were tipped off, Calamity, because whoever is pulling the bluff knew you'd come straight to me. I'd bet Gamblin' Ed Hansen is behind it. He's placing his money on Riordan, and so he's trying to safeguard his bets. He's hoping that the threat of getting killed will scare me into letting Riordan win."

Calamity Jane wasn't convinced. "Don't count on that, Cap'n," she said. She turned to the three other men. "You gents better make sure it is just a bluff. The Rio Kid'll be an easy target once he's in the ring. It won't be any trouble at all for somebody in the crowd to take a shot at him."

Hickok was stroking his mustache, worried-looking.

"I'll take care of it," he said. "Let's get started. It's nearly eight o'clock. . . ."

Gamblin' Ed Hansen was an enterprising promoter. He'd had a crew of men busy on the lot behind the Red Tent, and they had put up a prize-ring—a matter of posts and rope. They had also erected a dozen twenty-foot poles, three to a side of the ring, and nailed cross-pieces to the top of the poles. Two glowing lanterns hung from each cross-piece, illuminating the ring with a yellow glare.

Big though the lot was, it couldn't accommodate all the citizens and visitors to Deadwood. The lot was jammed with men, but thousands overflowed into the street and all around the Red Tent. Most of the gathering wouldn't be able to witness a single blow struck between the two fighters. But it was an excited crowd, and for Deadwood it was a Roman holiday. These rough citizens of the gold camp wanted a bloody fight, even if but few of them could see the battle.

BODYGUARDED by Mireles, Hickok and Eberts, the Rio Kid made his way through the crowd. There were cheers for him, and jeers. He reached the ring, climbed through the ropes. He removed his guns, stripped to the waist. He saw Gamblin' Ed Hansen at the ringside, with a dozen or so women—percentage girls from the saloons and honky-tonks, the gay ladies of Deadwood—gathered about him. Gamblin' Ed's funereal face wore a smile tonight. He was puffing on a cigar.

Jake Riordan came shoving his way forward, followed by Russ Mardin and the two tough-visaged men who had been with him that afternoon at the Red Tent. Riordan was already bare to the waist. His massive shoulders were muscle-corded. The heavy growth of hair on his broad chest glinted redly in the lantern light. Riordan's broad face was flushed. He was grinning broadly, confidently. He climbed into the ring, took the corner diagonally across from the one the Rio Kid occupied.

Gamblin' Ed Hansen climbed into the ring, held up his hands to quiet the crowd which was now cheering and jeering Jake Riordan. When quiet settled over the throng, Gamblin' Ed made a brief speech. He explained that it was to be a grudge fight and therefore all rules would be ignored. There would be no referee, and neither fighter could claim any fouls. It would be a brawl from start to finish, no holds barred, and there would be no rounds with time out. The fight would end when one fighter or the other was down for keeps.

"And let the best man win!" Gamblin' Ed finished up.

"Hold it, boys!" Wild Bill Hickok yelled. "I've got something to say." He ducked through the ropes, took the center of the ring. "I've heard talk that

CALAMITY JANE

"CALAMITY JANE" was born Martha Jane Canary in 1849, and is supposed to have come by her nickname after she rescued a soldier from hostile Indians. The soldier is alleged to have said later, "Jane's a good one to have around in a time of calamity."

Jane was. Orphaned at eight, she was adopted by the garrison of an Army post on the Montana frontier—and picked up a man-style education. In her teens, she could ride and shoot with the most expert soldiers and frontiersmen. She knew the Indian country well enough to serve as a guide for the soldiers, and the military establishments even in the most isolated spots got to know Calamity Jane well.

She married a soldier, and was widowed by the Indians. She worked as a muleskinner on the freighting trails, and she could "cuss out" a team of jugheads as expertly as any male teamster. She was an acquaintance of many famous men—Wild Bill Hickok, Buffalo Bill Cody, General Custer, Bat Masterson, Wyatt Earp. She married a second time, but again was soon widowed. Her second husband, a cowboy, was killed in a gunfight.

It was Calamity Jane who captured Jack McCall, the murderer of Wild Bill Hickok. In 1900, she was the star performer of a Wild West show at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, N. Y. She returned to the West, and in her later years "reformed." Her reformation was temporary, however, and she married a wood contractor on Bald Mountain. Calamity Jane's adventurous life ended at Deadwood and she lies at rest in the old cemetery there.

certain friends of Jake Riordan aim to kill the Rio Kid if he wins this fight." Hickok's voice was soft, its tone mild. But most of the people on the lot could hear every word he said. "I'm serving warning now that those certain friends of Riordan will have to answer to my guns if a single shot is fired at the

Rio Kid. And I'll be backed up by Sheriff Bullock"—he pointed to a grim-faced man wearing a handle-bar mustache and a star—"should I need help, along with some other good men with guns. That's a warning. Heed it."

He left the ring.

The Rio Kid faced Jake Riordan. The crowd remained quiet, tense.

"Go at it, boys!" one of the percentage girls squealed, and that served as a bell.

Riordan came from his corner, and the Rio Kid went to meet him. Riordan's face wore an ugly grimace. The Rio Kid was smiling thinly, and the devil-may-care gleam was bright in his eyes.

Riordan gained the center of the ring, stood there flat-footed with his knees bent, leaning slightly forward from the middle, huge fists held chest high. He kept his fists moving up and down, yet moving them no more than an inch or two—up and down, up and down. He bared his teeth and began to curse the Rio Kid in low but savage voice, working himself into a fury. The Rio Kid knew what it was to be hated then, from seeing it in Riordan's murky eyes.

Moving lightly, circling, the Rio Kid knew that Riordan wouldn't be satisfied with merely winning this fight. The man wanted to kill; he wanted to beat his opponent to death. The Rio Kid felt a quiver play through his nerves, and suddenly there was alive in him a primitive brutal eagerness. His stomach seemed to knot up; he felt the hard beat of his heart in his throat and in his temples. The beat quickened. He continued to circle, forcing Riordan to turn with him.

"Come on—come on, you son!" Riordan growled.

He drove his big body straight for the Rio Kid.

The Rio Kid's head dropped, Riordan's knuckles ripping along his hair. The Rio Kid flung up his arms, knocking aside Riordan's right fist as it beat in, but Riordan's weight carried him backward, off balance, and the next blow, driving through his guard, ripped across his left cheek. He tried to swerve but Riordan lunged into him and he took the freighter's knee in his stomach and another punch to the face.

HE felt himself swiftly falling. He hit the ropes, slid off them, and the back of his head struck the ground. He rolled over, jackknifed his body, sprang up, was caught in a hard flurry of jabbing punches, absorbing the punishment, shaken by it. Riordan's every blow was like a jolt of an ax-handle. The Rio Kid crossed Riordan's slugging arms, drove a fist to the man's blocky jaw.

Riordan grunted, staggered back, and the Rio Kid, moving lightly, crowded in and smothered him with a hail of short-jab blows. Riordan wheeled at the ropes, aside and out of reach. He had a second's respite, and used it to pull in great breaths. His chest was heaving, and sweat dripped down his grimacing face. Then the Rio Kid closed in, smashed him twice across the mouth.

Riordan reeled backward, blood trickling from his lips, and wariness was now in his eyes. He circled, back-stepping, his fists again jigging up and down, head low. He lashed out, but Riordan ducked and struck back. The blow caught the Rio Kid under the left eye, rocked his head back, caused his brain to reel and his vision to blur. Blood from a cut over his cheek-bone trickled down.

Riordan loomed before him, not wary now, but confident.

Riordan started battering him, hard about the body, and the crowd was howling. The Rio Kid bent low, rolled into the freighter, slamming him in the stomach with his shoulder. Riordan gasped, grunted an oath, hit the Rio Kid at the base of the skull with both down-sweeping fists. The Rio Kid sprawled on the ground, face down, and a sharp gasp went up from the crowd.

"Got you!" Riordan yelped gleefully.

He began to use his boots.

Panic swept through the Rio Kid as the first kick slammed into his body, and he thought wildly, "He'll boot me to death!" He tried to get up, but his arms

and legs failed him.

That part of the crowd that was for Riordan began to howl. The Rio Kid heard the wild voices. He heard a chant:

"Finish him, Jake—finish him!"

It grew, swelled to a roar. Riordan kicked and kicked again, but this punishment acted as an antidote to the effects of the blow to the base of the Rio Kid's skull. His brain cleared, and his strength stopped ebbing. When Riordan kicked again, the Rio Kid leaped to his knees and flung himself against the man's legs. He wrapped his arms about Riordan's legs, and toppled him over backward.

Riordan bellowed an oath but, unhurt, scrambled up.

The Rio Kid rose with him, dazed still but on guard, and they closed and slugged. They battered each other. The sweat glistened on their blow-reddened bodies, and the faces of both were bloody and stained. They gulped in air through loose-hanging mouths, chests heaving. They slugged and battered, each taking punishment that would have crippled an ordinary man.

And the crowd that had come for blood was awed. The yelling died away, and the two men fought in a shocked quiet. Often a solid blow sounded like a pistol shot.

Riordan had had the Rio Kid down and let him rise again, and so had lost his one good chance. The Rio Kid's head sagged, heavy-weighted, his fists were slow, often missing, but it was clear that he wouldn't go down again. Fear would prop him up. Fear of Riordan's slashing boots that could and would kill.

Dazed, the Rio Kid felt the jolt of Riordan's blows but not the pain. He was numb; he'd lost the capacity for feeling sharp pain. But there was a red-black mist before his eyes, and through it he saw his enemy but dimly. He could, however, see the strain and agony on Riordan's bloody, battered face.

Riordan, too, was slow-moving now, and often missing his blows. But game. Riordan was game.

CHAPTER VIII

The Decision

RIORDAN moved in and out, always punching. He moved in again, and the Rio Kid struck at his face and felt Riordan's teeth break against his fist. He saw Riordan stiffen, his face convulsed with pain. He started another blow, then checked it in the belief that Riordan was done.

But Riordan shook his head, went into a crouch, lunged forward. He caught the Rio Kid in his great arms, lifted him bodily, tried to smash his spine against one of the ring's posts.

The Rio Kid knew the danger. He gave a wild twist, throwing both of them against the ropes short of the post. He chopped at Riordan's nose with the side of his fist, smashing it, drawing a scream of agony from the man. Riordan dropped him, and the Rio Kid fell to his knees but leaped up at once.

Riordan was swaying drunkenly, hands to face, blood spurting. The Rio Kid hammered the freighter about the body, and Riordan staggered away. Riordan's mouth was loosely open when he lowered his hands, and his eyes rolled from side to side. Suddenly there was fear on Riordan's bloody face, stark terror, and he began to scream. At first his words made no sense to the Rio Kid's dazed mind, then they did.

"Kill him!" Riordan was yelling. "Shoot him, you Buckskins, like I gave you orders! Kill him, I tell you!"

The Rio Kid struck out once more, the final blow.

It landed solidly on Riordan's jaw. Riordan crumpled, landed on his side, heaved over onto his back, and lay limp with his arms flung out. He didn't try to get up. His chest rose and fell like laboring bellows, and his breathing made a rasping sound.

A gun roared. A slug whined near the Rio Kid's head.

Women screamed, men yelled crazily. The entire crowd turned into a frenzied mob, stampeding. Wild Bill Hickok's guns blasted. A man screamed in agony. Celestino Mireles leaped over the ropes, shoved a gun into the Rio Kid's hand.

"Come, General!" he said sharply. "It's over. Riordan is beaten!"

Mireles had a gun in his right hand. He supported his *compadre* with his left arm, and led him from the ring. The mob was still milling wildly, but there was no more shooting.

Steve Eberts, carrying Pryor's clothes and guns, was waiting. John Hunton and half a dozen of his employes formed a square about the Rio Kid and Mireles. Calamity Jane appeared, a gun in one hand and a whip in the other.

"Wild Bill downed that hombre who tried to plug you, Cap'n," Calamity said.

Hickok and Sheriff Bullock were bending over a man on the ground, a black-bearded man clad in flannel shirt and buckskin breeches. Hickok looked around.

"He's dying," Wild Bill said. "I'll stay with him, Kid, in case he's able to talk before he cashes in his chips. You let the boys take you back to the store."

The Rio Kid nodded.

He still leaned heavily upon Mireles. He had won the fight, true. But he had taken almost as bad a beating as Jake Riordan. He needed some patching up and a place to lie down.

There was celebrating in Deadwood once the panic caused by the shooting subsided. Men who had bet on the Rio Kid collected their winnings, and set out to squander them. Most of the losers were good losers, and helped the winners celebrate. Rumor spread that Gamblin' Ed Hansen's safe was cleaned out when he paid off, but his Red Tent was reaping a harvest tonight over its bar and across its gambling lay-outs. Gamblin' Ed wouldn't be forced into bankruptcy.

Every saloon in town was crowded. The main street was still thronged. The citizens were reluctant to call it a night. The fight was refought time and time again, made even bloodier in the telling than it had actually been, and there were arguments and brawls in a dozen places.

In the back room of Steve Eberts' store was a quiet sort of celebration, if it could be called that. Gathered there with the Rio Kid were Celestino Mireles, Eberts, Hickok, Hunton, and Calamity Jane. A bottle had been opened, a round of drinks downed. Mireles had dressed Pryor's cuts and bruises with a healing ointment, and now, washed up and dressed, the Rio Kid was feeling his usual self again except for a few sore spots.

He did no gloating at Jake Riordan's expense. He had whipped the man in a fair fight, and now, so far as he was concerned, it was best forgotten.

HE didn't join in when the others discussed the fight, but nodded when Calamity Jane said:

"I was right about the Buckskins planning to kill you if you won the fight, Cap'n. So you mark my words now, about this. That crowd is a vengeance-mad outfit. In the beginning its members swore to have revenge on the Army. Then they swore an oath to kill every Indian they came across, to pay the redskins back for raiding freight outfits and killing freighters. Then they got around to hating Mr. Hunton and wanting revenge on him. Now you'll be a marked man."

"I'll never question your word again, Calamity," the Rio Kid said. He glanced at the handsome Hickok. "Did the hombre you shot talk before he died?"

"A little," Hickok told him. "The three men Mr. Hunton fired—Boland, Wall, Robles—now head the Militia. They're called Chief Buckskins. Jake Riordan is a Chief Buckskin, too, but he doesn't ride with the outfit. That hombre told me that much before he died. I didn't get a chance to find out from him where the Militia's headquarters is located. Sheriff Bullock is sending word to the Army, about Riordan." He paused, puffed hard on his cigar.

"In the excitement the two men—the Dolan brothers—who travel with Riordan got him out of the ring and sneaked him away. The sheriff and I hunted for him, but it looks as though Riordan's friends smuggled him out of town."

"You look around Territorial's wagon yard?" Pryor asked.

"Sure," said Hickok. "No signs of Riordan there."

"You talk to Russ Mardin?"

"Yes. He swore that he didn't know Riordan was a member of the Militia until tonight," said Hickok. He smiled wryly. "Mardin made a fine speech about firing Riordan if he turned up for work again. He'll never admit having known that Riordan is a Buckskin. We've got the goods on Riordan, and he's skipped out on us. And we still haven't anything but suspicion on Mardin."

The Rio Kid nodded. "A man is innocent until he is proved guilty," he stated.

His bronzed face, badly cut and bruised, was thoughtful. Finally he seemed to have made up his mind about something. He looked at the bearded, lank-faced John Hunton.

"You can expect real trouble now," he said. "Things will move faster, toward a showdown. We'll have to be prepared. Looks to me as though Hickok, Mireles and I had better do some riding, starting tomorrow. What outfits do you have on the trail, right now?"

They settled down to business.

"We'll ride out in the morning," the Rio Kid repeated then.

John Hunton had a big freight outfit coming up from Cheyenne. . . .

Early the next morning the Rio Kid and Mireles were ready for the trail. They waited in front of the Emporium for Wild Bill Hickok to show up. Steve Eberts was opening the Emporium for another day of trade.

Early risers among the miners were already busy on their claims. Smoke curled lazily from many a breakfast fire. The door of the Randall store swung open. Virginia Randall emerged, crossed the street, a look of anger on

[*Turn page*]

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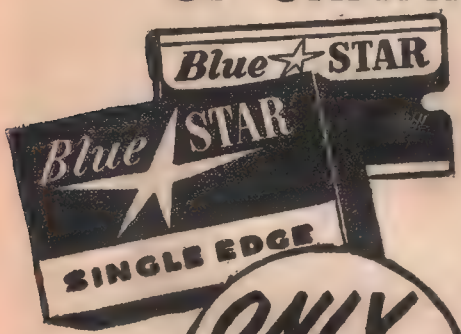

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her attractive face.

"Captain Pryor, may I ask you a question?" she asked, in a frosty voice.

Pryor swept off his hat, bowed. "Certainly, Miss Randall."

"Thank you," Virginia said. She was so upset she was pale. Her lips were thinned out, and her gray eyes flashed. "Just why did you think, Captain Pryor, that my brother and I would welcome charity?"

He had guessed upon seeing her anger that the Randalls had learned the reason for the sudden popularity of their store.

"I'm sorry you found out, Miss Randall," he said. "But you shouldn't feel humiliated. It was not an act of charity."

"It wasn't charity?" the girl cried.

"Deadwood was merely extending a friendly hand."

Virginia looked taken aback. "That—that is ridiculous!"

He smiled. "I did suggest the idea," he said. "Calamity Jane spread the word. The rest of it was spontaneous. It wasn't charity, Miss Randall, because the people who came to your store received more than merchandise for their money. Most people, no matter how hardened, have a childish side to their nature. They find enjoyment in little things. A trip to your store yesterday was something of a lark, and it gave all those people pleasure."

VIRGINIA was still frowning, but she did look less angry.

"I knew a rancher down in Texas," he went on. "A two-bit rancher. In those days, the Comanches were raiding the frontier ranches and settlements. The Comanches are cattle and horse thieves. They're the boldest of all rustlers. They raided this rancher's spread, ran off all his cattle. More than six hundred head. He had nothing left but a few horses. Worse still, he saddled up and trailed the Indians, and got wounded. He managed to return home. He was laid up for a couple weeks. When he was up and around again, he found cattle on his range—as many as he'd lost. His neighbors had got a herd together for him, each of them throwing in a few head of their own cattle, putting them into the unlucky rancher's brand. They'd never told him they were doing it, and though the rancher was a proud man he didn't resent it, for he knew that it wasn't the sort of charity that would make him feel obligated." Pryor smiled at the girl. "If he'd resented that friendliness, he would have hurt the feelings of his neighbors."

Steve Eberts had appeared at his doorway.

"Captain Pryor is right, Virginia," he said. "The folks were just being friendly toward you and Dick."

Virginia gave him a reproachful look. "You're to blame for it, Steve Eberts. You told Captain Pryor that Dick and I were to be pitied and he—"

"It was wholly my idea, Miss Randall," Pryor said.

"It seemed strange that so many customers should come to our store after there not being any for days at a time," the girl said. "I questioned some of them, and finally one told me that—that you, Captain, had spread word that we needed help. It made me feel awful. Like a—a person belonging in the poorhouse!"

Wild Bill Hickok came riding up on a sorrel gelding.

"Steve," the Rio Kid said, "you explain to Miss Randall that it's foolish for her to be upset about this."

He smiled again at the girl, then turned to mount Saber. Mireles was already mounted. They fell in alongside Hickok, and the three headed out the street.

They were close to Territorial Freighting Company's wagon yard when Russ Mardin came from one of Deadwood's numerous eating-places, called hash-houses by the miners and, after pausing to light a cigar, strode briskly in the direction of his office. Mardin glanced around as the three riders caught up with him. He scowled, then he managed a smile. It was a meaningless smile. Russ Mardin's florid face was never truthful in telling of his

thoughts or feelings. It was likely, the Rio Kid suspected, that Mardin's morning was spoiled by seeing him and Mireles and Hickok.

But Mardin halted to talk and, when the three reined in, he said, "It was a good fight, and you won it fairly, Pryor. Congratulations." His simulated friendliness would have misled most men. "By the way, did you locate Jake Riordan, Hickok?"

"No luck there," Hickok replied. "He's vamoosed."

"With good reason," Mardin said. "Stupid of him, giving it away that he's a member of the Buckskin Militia." He looked at Pryor. "For your information, Captain, Riordan is no longer connected in any way with Territorial Freighting."

"You fired him, of course," Pryor said, with mild sarcasm, "for being a Buckskin."

"Not exactly. But if he shows up here again, he'll discover he has no job," Mardin replied. "I won't claim I fired him, since I haven't seen him since you flattened him in the prize ring." He smiled again, started on, but quickly turned back. "A friendly word of advice, Captain Pryor. Riordan holds a grudge. Watch yourself."

Pryor nodded. "Thanks," he said.

CHAPTER IX

Wagon Raiders

HEADING through the long, narrow gorge that would take them to the southward trail, the Rio Kid and his companions rode on. He wondered. Warning—or threat? He was inclined to think it a threat. Russ Mardin was a good actor; he put on a fine show of innocence, but the Rio Kid would have gambled that the man was still in contact with Jake Riordan, and with the Buckskin Militia. And that his warning to watch out for an attempt on his life by Riordan—it had amounted to that—was a threat of death should the Rio Kid continue to meddle in the freighting war.

Wild Bill Hickok, too, was wondering about Mardin.

"He's so blamed innocent," he finally growled, "that the next thing we know he'll be claiming the Buckskins are raiding Territorial wagons!"

"Ees one tricky hombre," murmured Celestino Mireles, "that Senor Mardin."

The Rio Kid nodded agreement.

It was possible that Mardin might be shrewd enough to outwit even the Rio Kid and his *compadre* and the famous Wild Bill Hickok. And it wasn't to be forgotten that Mardin, despite his denial, had the Buckskin Militia at his beck and call, as tough and wild a band of men as could be found in all the West. Russ Mardin did not live by brains alone!

The three riders traveled southward over the Cheyenne Trail all that day. Late in the morning they passed a string of Territorial wagons—big rigs, canvas-sheeted, mule-drawn, each rig a wagon and trailer—heading south, empty and rattling noisily. In mid-afternoon, they passed another Territorial caravan of five wagon-and-trailer rigs. It was northbound, heavily loaded, and twenty mules were straining in the traces of each rig.

Plenty of boomer outfits were coming up-trail, traveling in groups, large and small, wagon outfits, or alone. Many of these Johnny-come-latelies had their wives and children along. Deadwood was bound to change from a camp into a full-fledged town within a short time. The women and children would make the difference. Coaches of the Cheyenne Stage Company raced by, northbound and southbound, but the riders saw no Hunton wagons that day.

They halted at a new camp on Spring Creek that night, sleeping in the open but dickering with a miner whose claim still wasn't showing color for supper and breakfast. In the morning they crossed the Divide, dropped down toward

French Creek and passed the Gordon Stockade.

They rode on south, forded the South Fork at sundown. There was a two-wagon southbound Hunton outfit going into camp on the south bank of the river, and the three riders shared the muleskinners' supper.

"Camp or go on, Bob?" Hickok asked, after they had eaten.

"We'll go on," the Rio Kid decided. "Hunton said we should meet his northbound outfit here at the South Fork or a little ways beyond. We'll stay in the saddle until we come upon it."

As they mounted and rode on he did not mention that he had a feeling—a hunch, a premonition—that they should locate the wagon train as soon as possible. He had experienced such feelings before, and knew that they panned out often enough not to be ignored.

An hour later, riding through the thickening dusk, he found again that his hunches were not mere old-maidish alarms but forewarnings of trouble. In the near distance there was a sudden crashing of guns.

The Hunton outfit was under attack.

The Buckskin Militia was raiding again tonight!

There were seven freight rigs in the Hunton train, all heavily loaded and four made up of two wagons in tandem. The four rigs consisting of wagons and trailers were each drawn by twenty fine mules, and manned by a muleskinner and a swamper. The three other wagons had fewer mules in harness, and the driver of each handled his rig alone.

Boss of the outfit was Nate "Patchy" Hackett, one of Hunton's most trusted men, and he had two men, mounted like himself, as guards. Patchy, so called because he had lost an eye in a fight with Sioux raiders and now wore a black patch over the empty socket, wanted to make his night halt on the South Fork. So he was still on the trail when darkness closed in. He was on the move when the raiders struck.

There was no warning, no traditional demand of "Hands up!"

The Buckskins fired a volley from their ambush, a brush and aspen thicket, then charged forward while the first cries of frightened and wounded men rang out.

IT was a big bunch, about twenty men. They wore the familiar buckskin masks. They swept upon the wagon train with guns blazing. In these attacks upon the Hunton wagons, it was the Buckskin Militia's custom to attempt to strike terror into the hearts of the muleskinners and the guards—not just get the drop on them.

Patchy Hackett was at the head of the train when the gunfire racketed. He grabbed out his six-gun, swung his horse about, saw the masked band emerge from the thicket. He saw Ike Martin, one of the guards, topple from his horse. He saw the other one, "Kansas Kelly" Rodd, slump forward over his saddlehorn. He saw, too, that some of the muleskinners were hit—killed or wounded—and some others were abandoning their teams and fleeing for their lives.

Patchy Hackett's gun began to blaze, and in a rage Patchy galloped straight at the raiders. Patchy had gone berserk!

The three riders topped a rise and saw the raiders sweep in upon the wagon train. The Rio Kid was gripped by quick anger, and he gave no thought to the odds.

"Come on!" he yelled. "Let's get at 'em!"

He let Saber have his head, and the dun war horse galloped on toward the din of battle. Hickok growled an oath, and Celestino Mireles muttered one in his native tongue. The three charged the Buckskins' flank, guns crashing. And the raiders, caught off guard at the moment of victory, were thrown into abrupt confusion.

Perhaps the Buckskins never realized that only three men were attacking. The nearly full darkness masked the Rio Kid and his companions. Too, the oncoming trio kept up such a heavy and expert fire that the rattled Buckskins may have believed that only two or

three times as many men could do such shooting. At any rate, the raiders' confusion became panic and some began an immediate flight.

Seldom had three such gunslingers joined against such odds. But then the Rio Kid, Celestino Mireles and Wild Bill Hickok had few equals, and no peers when it came to the six-gun. With so many targets, they missed few shots. Saddles emptied. Riderless horses, badly spooked, raced one way and another with empty stirrups flying.

A few freighters had remained by their wagons, and they were firing at the raiders with six-guns and rifles. One freighter, hatless, bald-headed, a black patch over one eye, was sprawled on the ground, wounded, but shooting from where he had fallen.

Yells, curses, screams mingled with the racketed shots. Fear-crazed horses shrilled. Hoofs thundered. Suddenly the last surviving raider was in wild flight, vanishing through the darkness into the brush, and the Rio Kid knew that the Buckskins who were fleeing would not return and renew the attack. He swung back where the patch-wearing freighter was now struggling to his feet.

Patchy Hackett had been hit in the left shoulder by a .45 slug, knocked from his horse. But he was rawhide tough and he wadded his neck scarf inside his shirt and against his wound to halt the flow of blood.

"Stranger," he said to the Rio Kid, "I was never so glad to see anybody in all my born days. Patchy Hackett's the name. I'm boss of this outfit. Some of my boys got gunned down right off, some others rabbited on me. But if it hadn't been for you and your partners, those Buckskin devils would have looted my cargo and burned my rigs and killed my mules. Dang it, I'd like to shake your hand!"

Five of Hackett's men were dead, three besides Hackett were wounded. Those who had fled warily returned through the darkness, now that the danger was past. With the wounded patched up, there were still enough men to handle the seven rigs. Patchy Hackett was determined to push on to the South Fork, once his wound was bandaged. None of the wounded were in a serious condition, luckily.

Wild Bill Hickok reported that eight of the raiders had been killed and two, wounded, were prisoners. Mireles was standing guard over the two prisoners.

"Maybe we can questfon them," Hickok said, "and learn something worthwhile about that organization."

The Rio Kid left Patchy Hackett to the crude doctoring of one of the muleskinners, and went with Hickok to where Mireles was watching the two captives. A fire had been built for light by which to treat the wounded, and its glare showed two sullen faces from which the buckskin masks had been torn. One prisoner, wounded in the left side, was stretched out on his back. The other, who had a bullet-hole through his left arm, sat on the ground. Both men were bristly with beard, shabby-haired. Both wore the usual garb of the Wyoming freighters.

They were tough men, but all mule-

[*Turn page*]

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skinners had to be tough. The difference was something else. These two, like the other members of the Buckskin Militia, possessed a streak of evil. They had turned renegade for profit, not just for the adventure of it.

The Rio Kid glanced at Mireles.

"They talked any, *amigo?*"

The young Mexican shrugged. "Only to curse me, General," he replied. "You want me to make them talk, eh?" He drew the long-bladed knife from his sash, made a great show of testing its sharpness while gazing at the pair with a scowl on his hawklike face. "I think, General, that this hombre"—he indicated the less seriously wounded prisoner—"will talk plenty with a leetle help."

The Rio Kid nodded. It was worth a try, Mireles' bluff.

The raider with the bullet-shattered arm was a skinny man, and he stared at Mireles with terror on his bony face. He looked as though he would scream. He began to move crabwise away from the Mexican. Mireles took a threatening step toward him.

"You talk, eh, hombre?" he said. "These questions *El General* asks, you answer, no?"

"Purd, you keep your mouth shut!" the prone prisoner muttered.

The man called Purd continued to stare at Mireles as he would have stared at a coiled rattler within striking distance of him. Suddenly his face went slack.

"What do you hombres want to know?"

"Who led the raid?" asked the Rio Kid.

"One of the Chief Buckskins."

"Which one?"

"Boland. Matt Boland."

"Was Jake Riordan along?"

Purd shook his head. "Riordan's in hiding," he muttered. "He's not over the beating he got the other night. He's at Militia headquarters."

Wild Bill Hickok nudged the Rio Kid, who asked:

"Where's the Militia headquarters?"

Before Purd could reply, the other prisoner said savagely:

"Purd, you took an oath never to talk. It's death for squealers!"

He heaved over onto his side, and in his hand was a derringer that had been concealed in his boot. The Rio Kid shouted to Mireles, and the Mexican, closest to the man, tried to kick the sneak gun from the fellow's hand—a breath too late. The vicious little weapon roared, cutting short the scream of terror tearing from Purd's throat. The slug caught him in the head, killing him instantly.

Mireles kicked the derringer from the killer's hand before its other barrel could be fired.

A couple of muleskinners came running up.

"This hombre is Black Jack Mundy!" one shouted. "They don't come any tougher or meaner."

The Rio Kid nodded grimly. There would be no extracting information from such a man.

"We'll patch him up," he said. "Try to keep him alive for the Army to hang."

He was bitterly disappointed. The Buckskin Militia might well have been wiped out, with the help of the Army, if he had learned the location of its headquarters. Now it would be a long, hard, bloody fight.

CHAPTER X

Wild Bill Passes

JUST four days later, the wagon train reached Deadwood escorted by the Rio Kid, Mireles and Hickok. Its arrival was opportune, for provisions were running low in the camp and many of the miners did not have enough to eat. Feeding the ever-increasing population of Deadwood and the nearby camps was becoming a problem that could only be solved by ending the freighting war with its destruction of Hunton wagons.

Territorial Freighting, despite Russ Mardin's attempt to control the hauling as a monopoly, did not have enough rigs on the trail to supply the thousands of gold-seekers overrunning the Black Hills. In fact, many men were hungry enough to leave their claims and go off with their rifles to shoot deer and small game. Steve Eberts' store, the largest in Deadwood, again was low in such staples as flour, salt, bacon, beans, and coffee. Several smaller stores were entirely sold out of food and two hash-houses were temporarily closed.

The bloody fight below the South Fork had been a setback for the Buckskin Militia and it had taken the lives of several of John Hunton's best men. The wagons with their precious provisions had come through, but the Rio Kid did not consider the victory a profitable one in other respects.

"Black Jack" Mundy, still alive and now turned over to soldiers from Fort Meade, had recovered sufficiently from his wound to have bragged that the losses suffered by the Militia would not affect the organization's strength.

"There's always fifty members," Mundy had said. "If a man is lost, there's always a new one to fill his place. Plenty of tough hombres coming into the Hills, nowadays."

Mundy was slated either for the gallows or a long term in military prison, but he grew increasingly cocky as he recovered his strength. Perhaps he expected the Militia to rescue him. At any rate, the Rio Kid realized that if Black Jack Mundy was typical of the Buckskins the Militia would be difficult to smash.

He talked it over with Mireles, Hickok and John Hunton immediately after the safe arrival of the caravan.

"If we're right in believing that Russ Mardin is connected with the Militia," he said soberly, "we haven't hurt him at all. Mardin himself isn't risking anything, and that battle didn't hurt him and Territorial. We still have nothing on him but suspicion."

"That's getting to be just about enough for me," Hickok growled. "I've a mind to brace him, to give him a chance to shoot it out or clear out of the hills."

The Rio Kid shook his head. "It wouldn't work, Bill," he said. "Mardin is the sort that gets by on his wits. He wouldn't meet you in a gun-fight, and he wouldn't be scared off. You could run him out of the Hills by force, but he'd go to the Army for protection. The Army would be obliged to give it to him, for nothing can be proved against the man."

"So we're getting nowhere fast," Hickok replied, disgruntled.

"We'll keep on getting nowhere," said the Rio Kid, "until we smash the Buckskin Militia. We can't do that by merely gun-guarding Mr. Hunton's wagons. We've got to trick that crowd, somehow."

John Hunton worried his neat spade beard. "You got an idea, Captain?"

Pryor had to admit that he did not. But he said:

"I'll try to work something out."

With Mireles, he left the wagon yard and went to Steve Eberts' Emporium. The Mexican took their horses around back to put them up in the lean-to barn. Pryor learned from a clerk in the store that Eberts was visiting the Randalls. He crossed the street, entered the smaller store. Its shelves, tables and counters were almost empty of stock. The citizens of Deadwood had just about moved all of the Randalls' poor quality merchandise.

Steve Eberts now was on good terms with Dick and Virginia Randall. It was apparent that the Randalls had shoved aside pride and were accepting the friendliness of the town's people for a stroke of good fortune.

Eberts shook the Rio Kid's hand, asked about his trip, frowned when told about the fight with the Buckskins. But Steve Eberts was in love, and he soon explained what was at the moment more important to him.

"Dick and Ginny have money enough to restock, now that they've moved their old merchandise," he said, his boyish face beaming. "I'm helping them make

out a list of the sort of merchandise they should stock."

Virginia smiled at Bob Pryor. "I've taken your advice, Captain Pryor," she said. "It was foolish to be so proud. I'm planning to take the stage for Cheyenne on a buying trip."

HE nodded, returning her smile. He almost envied Steve Eberts. Virginia was a lovely girl.

Later, in Eberts' office, he told his merchant friend that there was still no progress toward ending the freighting trail war. Eberts nodded gloomily.

"It's a tougher nut to crack than I thought when I wrote to you, Bob," he said. "At that time I thought you would be able to clear up this trouble in a day or two."

"The Buckskins are tough," Pryor said. "And Mardin is devilishly shrewd."

"Mardin is a fool," Eberts said bitterly. "There's plenty of freighting business for both his firm and Hunton's, but he has to be whole-hog."

"He's out to make himself rich."

"At the expense of everybody else."

"That's right. It's not only Hunton that he's hurting."

"He's hurting every man in the Black Hills, indirectly," Eberts said. "Conditions are bad, and they'll become worse. Stocks should be built up over the summer. Big stocks of food. Winter comes early here, and winter in the Hills is hard. Once the snow comes, it'll be almost impossible for freight to be brought in." He struck his desk with an angry fist. "I'm not thinking merely of my own profits!" he added. "I'm a human being first, a merchant second. I don't want to see starvation when winter comes!"

The Rio Kid nodded. "There's still time," he said. "And maybe we can figure out a way to get at the Buckskin Militia."

But he didn't speak with his usual confident tone. For he admitted to himself that he was stymied.

He was like an officer about to start a campaign against the enemy without a mapped-out plan.

On the following day tragedy struck. This time the Rio Kid had no premonition of impending disaster. He was in Steve Eberts' office, trying to work out some scheme by which the Buckskin Militia might be baited into a trap, when Calamity Jane came running in from the street. She was wildly excited, yelling for the Rio Kid. He rushed into the store room. "What's the trouble, Calamity?" he demanded.

She grabbed his arm in a viselike grip. "Where's Bill?" she asked breathlessly. "Where's Wild Bill Hickok?"

"I haven't seen him since early this morning," the Rio Kid told her. "What's all the excitement about?"

Calamity told him with a great outpouring of words, at the same time leading him to the street door. Calamity Jane, with her wide acquaintance among the tougher element of Deadwood, had been tipped off by a friend that the Buckskin Militia had sent a man into the camp to kill Hickok. The man wasn't to give Hickok a chance to go for his guns. He was to gun Hickok down from behind.

"It's no false alarm, Cap'n!" Calamity Jane said hysterically. "We've got to find Bill and warn him!"

Her fright was communicated to the Rio Kid, and he hurried out with her. Once outside, they broke into a run. They looked into the Red Tent, but Hickok was not there. They tried the Frisco Bar next, and again drew a blank. They asked about Hickok in each saloon, but no one knew where the famous gunfighter was at the moment. On the street again, Calamity yelled at a miner:

"Seen Wild Bill?"

The miner nodded, pointed to a saloon.

"Playing poker in that deadfall."

The indicated saloon was about a hundred yards further along the street. A saddle horse stood at its hitch-rack. Calamity Jane slowed to a walk, heaving a sigh of relief.

"Thank heaven we're in time!" she said fervently.

At that instant a shot blasted.

A man came backing from the saloon, a gun in his hand. He whirled, ran to the horse at the rack, tore its reins free, swung up. The saddle turned under his weight, slipping under the horse's belly, throwing the man to the ground. He jumped up, started running toward the Rio Kid and Calamity Jane. He was a young man, but there was a depraved look on his face. He was a homely man; he had a broken nose and he was cross-eyed. He halted, seeing the Rio Kid and Calamity Jane drawing their guns, then swung around and fled in the opposite direction.

"It's that no-good Jack McCall!" Calamity Jane cried.

THE Rio Kid held his fire, not knowing what had happened in the saloon. Others came running from neighboring buildings and from along the street. They got in the Rio Kid's way, slowing his progress, and he lost sight of McCall.

"What happened?" he heard somebody ask.

He heard the shocking reply. "Jack McCall killed Wild Bill Hickok!"

A hue and cry was raised, and the whole of Deadwood boiled with a wild excitement while the man-hunt was under way. The formidable Calamity Jane found the killer hiding in a butcher-shop. Calamity Jane took his gun, brought him to the street. McCall's ugly face was a mask of terror. The street was now thronged with men, many loudly demanding that he be strung up. Cooler heads insisted that the killer be given a trial.

There was a lot of argument. The citizens who wanted to hang McCall argued that no trial could be held, for no courts had been established in the Black Hills. The citizens who insisted that a criminal had a right to a trial suggested that it be a frontier court, a miners' mass meeting, and finally they had their way.

The Rio Kid was sick at heart as he entered the saloon, pushing through the crowd now gathered there to gape at Wild Bill Hickok's body.

Hickok had been shot from behind as he played poker with three other men. His body was slumped forward on the table, and a smile was frozen upon his handsome face. His stiffening hand still held his cards, a pair of aces and a pair of eights.

"Aces and eights," somebody whispered. "Dead man's hand!"

Pryor's bronzed face was rocky. There was grief in his blue eyes. He felt choked up, and when Calamity Jane came in he understood her unashamed tears. Calamity Jane wiped her eyes with her purple neckscarf. "A man like that killed by a bum!" she said huskily. "It's not right!"

The Rio Kid took the woman's arm, led her away.

At the doorway, they met Celestino Mireles. The Mexican had been seeking the Rio Kid. His face was grave.

"A word with you, *General mio*," he said solemnly.

Calamity Jane said that she would go on, that she would be all right, so the Rio Kid drew Mireles to the far side of the barroom.

"What is it, *amigo?*" he asked.

Mireles handed him a folded paper.

"It was slipped into my sash by someone in the crowd outside, General," Mireles said. "I did not see who it was. So many hombres were close to me."

Pryor unfolded the paper. A few words were scrawled upon it, and he read:

Hickok first, then the Rio Kid.
The Buckskin Militia.

Wild Bill Hickok was buried in the Deadwood cemetery the next day, August 3rd, 1876, and most of Deadwood's citizens were at the funeral. But grief turned to anger, for the so-called miners' court let McCall go scot-free. As with many famous men, Hickok had had a host of friends—and a host of enemies. His enemies had managed to get their own men on the jury, and the verdict was "Not Guilty."

Not Guilty!

The cringing McCall's defense was

that he had simply avenged his brother who had been killed by Hickok. The court accepted the defense, not bothering to check to see if McCall lied.

Immediately after the acquittal, Jack McCall slipped away from Deadwood. But he was not forgotten. The truth came out, or what seemed the truth. McCall had been hired to assassinate Hickok. Wild Bill's friends, notably "Colorado Charley" Utter, dug up evidence that the lawless element had feared that Hickok was to be made marshal of Deadwood by the more law-abiding citizens.

The group headed by Colorado Charley swore that they would not rest until McCall was hanged. This group sent an urgent message to the United States marshal at Yankton.

The Rio Kid and his friends held to their theory that McCall either had been a member of the Buckskin Militia or a hireling of that organization. The warning Pryor had received seemed proof that the killing had been instigated by the Buckskins.

CHAPTER XI

A Plan Is Made

BOB PRYOR met with Hunton, Calamity Jane, and Celestino Mireles in the back room of the Emporium immediately after the funeral.

The Rio Kid was grim. Never before had he been so determined. It was not his habit to make high-sounding resolutions, but he was in deadly earnest now.

"I'll leave McCall to Utter and his crowd," he said. "But I'll hunt down the men who used McCall for killing, no matter how long it takes."

"That warning, Bob—" Steve Eberts said worriedly.

The Rio Kid made an impatient gesture. "A senseless act. Bravado. I needed no warning to know that the Buckskin Militia has me marked for death." He turned to John Hunton. "I've a plan worked out," he told the freighter. "But I'll need help to pull it off."

"Count on me, Captain," said Hunton. "To the limit."

"Thanks. It's like this, sir. Sometimes the Buckskins loot your wagons before burning or wrecking them. Sometimes they destroy the cargo. Right?"

Hunton nodded.

"What sort of freight do they destroy?" the Rio Kid asked. "Heavy merchandise like those stoves you told me about?"

"That's it, Captain," Hunton said thoughtfully. "Mining machinery, tools, furniture, building supplies. Any freight that's heavy or bulky, they simply destroy. They never make off with the loaded wagons, but haul their loot away by pack animals."

"What sort of freight do they like for loot?"

"Food, clothing, bedding," Hunton said. "They've got away with thousands of dollars' worth of that sort of merchandise. My idea is that they're building up a huge cache, figuring on unloading it at profiteering prices when winter blocks the freighting trails—when such merchandise is badly needed." He eyed the Rio Kid thoughtfully, stroking his neat spade beard. He hazarded a guess. "You want to bait them into a raid, Captain?"

The Rio Kid nodded.

He rose from his chair, began a restless pacing. He looked like an officer mapping a bold campaign. His boot heels beat out a sharp tattoo on the plank floor.

"My scheme is a simple one," he finally said crisply. "I'd like a big outfit made up, the wagons carrying the sort of freight the Buckskins like for loot. Their spies at Cheyenne will see the rigs being loaded, and they'll see the outfit start out on the trail. It will appear to be no different than any of your outfits, but—"

Hunton nodded. "The outfit will be

the bait for a trap?" he asked.

"That's it," said the Rio Kid. "But every muleskinner and swamper will be a picked man. The first night out of Cheyenne we'll have half a dozen expert riflemen join the outfit secretly. Each rifleman will conceal himself in a wagon, and remain concealed. Another group of good men should be outfitted as boomers heading for the Black Hills. They'll travel behind the freight outfit, at a distance of about a mile. At the first sign of trouble, they'll leave their boomer wagons and come to the aid of the men defending the freight wagons."

"Sounds like a good plan," Hunton muttered.

"I'd like to be in on it," Steve Eberts put in.

"*El General,*" murmured Mireles, "has more to say."

"Keep talking, Cap'n," Calamity Jane urged.

"I'd like another half-dozen good men on horses," the Rio Kid went on. "Under your leadership, Mr. Hunton. This bunch would be a couple of miles off the trail, traveling parallel to the freight outfit. At the first sign of raiders, the wagon boss can send a rider out to you. You can bring in your bunch, and you'll arrive in time to smash the raid."

Hunton nodded. "Let me point out," he said, "that this plan of yours is likely to give the Militia a sound beating. But it won't wipe the organization out completely. Not all of the Buckskins will take part in a single raid. There will be survivors."

"I'm aware of that," the Rio Kid said. "I'm planning this trap for but one purpose—to follow the survivors of the raid, if the raid comes off, to the Militia's headquarters. Once we've located the Buckskins' hideout, we'll make our plans to round up the entire band." He paused, smiled faintly, then added, "No matter where the raid takes place, Mireles and I will be close by, and we'll do the tracking."

THE plan would take some little time in preparation, and John Hunton left Deadwood that same afternoon on the Cheyenne stage-coach. He intended to recruit the fighting men needed in Cheyenne and the nearby rangeland. Since he had been long established in Wyoming Territory, Hunton had many friends in Cheyenne and upon the surrounding ranches. He preferred to call upon his friends rather than to hire gun-toughs, some of whom might sell him out to the Buckskin Militia.

Once all preparations were made and the plan was ready to be put into operation, Hunton would send a messenger to the Rio Kid with the date the wagon train and its gun-guards were to take the trail out of Cheyenne. Pryor and Mireles could then ride south. In the meantime, the Rio Kid and his trail-mate were to remain in Deadwood in an attempt to mislead the Buckskin Militia into believing that no trap was being laid.

The inactivity was something of a strain on both him and the Mexican, for these partners of the vengeance trail were restless men. Waiting was difficult for them. However, they had to keep a constant vigil. The Rio Kid did not forget for a single moment that he, and no doubt Celestino Mireles too, was marked for death by the Buckskin Militia. They had to guard against a sneak such as Wild Bill Hickok's killer. But the Rio Kid was inclined to believe that no Deadwood bum like Jack McCall would be sent to attempt to kill him.

"Jake Riordan will want revenge for the beating I gave him," he told Mireles. "He won't be satisfied unless he himself tries to kill him. It's Riordan I've got to watch out for."

Riordan, however, was keeping clear of Deadwood.

Calamity Jane got in touch with the Rio Kid at least once a day. She went everywhere in Deadwood. She frequented even the worst dives as boldly as a man, and she had friends everywhere, even among the town's lawless element. More than once as the days passed, Calamity Jane said:

"I can't savvy it, Cap'n. There's no word coming through the grapevine

about the Buckskins aiming to kill you. Why should they have killed Wild Bill and not make an attempt on your life?"

"It'll come, Calamity," Pryor said grimly. "It's bound to come."

"I'll keep my ears open," Calamity Jane replied. "I don't want you, Cap'n, to get gunned down like Bill was—without warning."

Pryor often thought of Hickok during this period of waiting, and he wondered if Wild Bill might not still be alive had it not been for his having urged the man to get the trouble-shooting job with John Hunton. But logic told him that Hickok would have certainly come up against the Buckskin Militia later on, just as he had already antagonized the local lawless crowd, with the same fatal result. The fact was that Wild Bill's fabulous luck had run out.

The Rio Kid occasionally encountered Russ Mardin on the street or in some saloon. One night in Gamblin' Ed Hansen's Red Tent the boss of Territorial Freighting approached the Rio Kid with a simulated friendliness. There was a smile on Mardin's florid face.

"I've been seeing you around, Captain," Mardin said. "I take it that you've given up your fight against the Buckskins." He paused to light a cigar. "Since Hickok's death," he added then.

The Rio Kid still was convinced that Mardin was working hand-in-glove with the Buckskin Militia, and he was content to let the man believe what he wanted to believe.

"Not much I can do," he said. "Hunton hasn't any northbound outfits on the trail. The Buckskins have holed up somewhere." He shrugged. "You might say the trail I was following petered out."

"Lucky for you, maybe."

"How so?"

"You might have got yourself killed."

"I might," said the Rio Kid. He gave Mardin a flat look. "What's on your mind, anyway? You don't like me enough to want to hold an idle conversation with me." The Texas drawl was heavy in his voice. "What's bothering you, Mardin?"

MARDIN signaled a bartender, ordered drinks.

"I can honestly say I don't dislike you, Captain," he said, when they were served. "In fact, I respect you. Your failure with the Buckskin Militia doesn't take the edge off my admiration for you." He lifted his glass. "To you, Captain."

The Rio Kid smiled, and drank with the man.

He was curious. He knew that Mardin did have something important to say, and he was eager to hear it. He waited.

"I understand that John Hunton went back to Cheyenne," Mardin said finally. "I assume it's true when you say that he hasn't any outfit northbound on the trail to the Black Hills. If I were in his boots, I'd withdraw entirely from the Black Hills haul. After all, Hunton will still be able to freight to the Army posts and the Indian agencies. As he's always done. Territorial Freighting isn't interested in that business."

"Go on," the Rio Kid invited.

"Well, Captain, I'd like to make a deal with Hunton."

"I see. But why discuss it with me?"

Mardin studied the lighted end of his cigar. "You are friendly with Hunton," he said slowly. "I thought you might act as intermediary. I'd make it worth your while, Captain, if you could swing the deal. My offer is this—I'll buy all Hunton's wagons and teams that he doesn't need for his hauling to the military posts and the Indian agencies. I'll pay him what they're worth, plus a bonus of a thousand dollars for his agreement not to reenter the freighting business in the Black Hills."

"Impatient, aren't you, Mardin?"

"What do you mean?"

"I figured you'd just wait until the Buckskins bankrupted Hunton."

Mardin frowned. "You wrong me, Rio Kid. I'm a fair man. And I deny, as I've denied it before, that I have any connection with the Buckskin Militia."

Rio Kid smiled faintly. "If that was true, your outfits would be raided. And even if they aren't being raided now,

you'd fear that the Buckskins would turn their attention to your wagons once Hunton stopped using the Black Hills trail. You—"

Mardin cut him short, suddenly angry. "Rio Kid, I'm different from Hunton. If a single wagon of mine was raided, I'd gather together a band of gunfighters, the toughest men I could hire, and hunt down the raiders. I'd hunt them down, one by one, and I'd hang them! I wouldn't let up until the last raider was dancing with his feet off the ground!"

The man meant it. Russ Mardin was as ruthless as he was shrewd.

"I'll tell Hunton about your offer when I see him again," the Rio Kid said.

Mardin nodded. "Get him to accept it, and there'll be a thousand dollars in it for you." He smiled, and abruptly turned away.

Rio Kid put his back to the bar and watched the man stride from the Red Tent. He was puzzled. He couldn't understand why Russ Mardin should suddenly want to bargain when it appeared—on the surface, at least—that he was winning the war of the freighting trails.

The only conclusion that the Rio Kid could hit upon was that Mardin, uncannily shrewd, suspected that a trap was being set for the Buckskin Militia, and wanted to deal with Hunton before such a trap closed upon his secret allies, the Buckskins.

CHAPTER XII

"A Woman Talks Too Much"

STEVE EBERTS was coming along with his courtship of Virginia Randall. The girl hadn't as yet been able to make her trip to Cheyenne to buy merchandise for the Randall store because her brother was laid up. Dick Randall's game leg was troubling him. Dick had had a fall and wrenched his leg and now, being abed, must be cared for by his sister.

Steve Eberts visited the Randalls almost every evening. One evening Eberts was later than usual in returning from the store across the street, and the Rio Kid and Mireles, waiting in the back room of the Emporium, had about decided to turn in when they heard Eberts let out a wild yell from in front of the store.

The Rio Kid ran into the store room, Mireles close behind him.

They saw Eberts, who had apparently just left the Randall store, run out into the street. A gunshot flashed in the darkness, and the Rio Kid reached the doorway just in time to see the merchant collapse to the ground. Eberts had been shot down by a rider—a masked rider—over in front of the Randall store. Now two other masked men came rushing from the little store and mounted their waiting horses. The Rio Kid and Mireles leaped out into the street, their guns crashing. The three riders swung away at a gallop, firing back, disappearing into the darkness almost immediately.

"Get the horses, *amigo!*" the Rio Kid said curtly.

He ran to where Steve Eberts lay sprawled as Mireles rushed off to the barn at the rear of the Emporium. Kneeling by the merchant, the Rio Kid found that Eberts wasn't seriously wounded. The slug had hit him in the left side, torn the flesh and perhaps broken some ribs, but it was a comparatively slight injury. Eberts was suffering mostly from shock.

"It was Jake Riordan, Bob!" Eberts said excitedly. "I knew him even though he was masked. It was Riordan who shot me!"

Virginia came running from the store, crying out upon seeing that Eberts was hurt. The Rio Kid spoke a few reassuring words to her, then asked what had happened in her store. Virginia was badly frightened, but not hysterical.

"Two men came in just after Steve left," she told him. "They had guns, and they were wearing masks. They de-

manded our money. They said they'd shoot Dick if I didn't give it to them. I had to do as they said, Captain Pryor. I—I was terrified!"

He nodded, his face grim and puzzled.

A crowd was gathering. Excited men were asking what had happened. The Rio Kid gave them no answers. He urged them to take care of Steve Eberts, then hurried around to the lean-to barn where his *compadre* was saddling their horses. He intended to hunt down Jake Riordan and his companions, and he didn't stop to puzzle out why the Buckskin Militia should have chosen the Randalls as hold-up victims.

The three hold-up men had fled through the numerous knobby, timbered hills between Deadwood and Whitewood Creek. The trail was easily followed. There were diggings all through the section, and the Rio Kid and his companion had only to call out to a claim-owner at his campfire to ask if a trio of riders had passed within a few minutes. The shouted answer was always "Yes!"

Short of the Whitewood, the trail swung west toward a small mining camp called Sundog.

A late-traveling prospector told the Rio Kid and Mireles:

"Yeah, I saw 'em. Three hombres wearing masks. Heading straight for Sundog, but not in much of a hurry. They were holding their horses down to a walk. What's going on?"

"Hold-up, friend," the Rio Kid said, and rode on with Mireles.

They rode slowly now, warily.

"Thees ees a funny thing, eh, General?" Mireles murmured.

The Rio Kid nodded in agreement. It was odd. But he was no longer puzzled by the maneuver. Wild Bill Hickok had been killed in a most uncomplicated fashion. The killer had simply stepped up behind Wild Bill and shot him in the back. This hold-up and flight was the beginning of an attempt on the Rio Kid's life. It was more complicated because Jake Riordan—if Steve Eberts was right about the identity of the masked man who shot him—was making the attempt.

RIORDAN hated Pryor, and he wanted a personal revenge. Knowing that it was too risky for him to enter Deadwood openly, Riordan had chosen a sure method of baiting the Rio Kid away from town. Riordan had known how the Randalls had sold out their stock of merchandise. He had taken it for granted that the money realized from the sale would be kept in the store, and Buckskin Militia spies would have reported to him that the Randalls had not yet used their receipts to restock. Riordan well knew that in any frontier town an injury to a woman was quickly avenged, and he had counted on the Rio Kid, who was friendly toward Virginia Randall, to do the avenging.

Riordan would have held up some of the luckier claim-owners had robbery for tonight's job been his only motive, for that would have been far more profitable. Some of the Deadwood miners had a hundred times more gold in their possession than Riordan and his companions had stolen in specie and dust from the Randall store.

It was a trap, and the Rio Kid was letting himself be baited into it.

But not blindly.

With Mireles, he rode warily. The two partners had followed too many vengeance trails to be so easily hoodwinked, and they were alert now for an ambush. They rode cautiously into Sundog, a cluster of cabins and tents in a clearing among the brooding pines and quaking aspens. A shaggy-bearded man stood in a cabin doorway, smoking a pipe, and he eyed the two horsemen curiously.

"Looking for somebody?" he asked.

"Three riders wearing masks," the Rio Kid replied. "You see them?"

"They passed by."

"How long ago?"

"Two, three minutes ago," the miner replied. He took his pipe from his mouth, pointed southwest. "They took the trail to Coffin Rock."

He would have asked questions, but the Rio Kid and Mireles rode on. They found a narrow trail through dense timber, then heard a rider coming

along behind them. They swung off the trail, took cover among some pines, guns drawn, and watched the rider come loping along from Sundog. It was Calamity Jane.

The Rio Kid hailed her, and she reined in.

Calamity Jane was excited, and she had been worried until she found Pryor and Mireles safe.

"Turn back, Cap'n!" Calamity Jane urged. "It's a trap, pure and simple. You two hombres ride on, you'll be caught in an ambush. I heard what happened, and I had a word with Steve Eberts. That storekeeper claims one of the hold-up men was Jake Riordan." She paused to catch her breath. "Besides, Cap'n, a messenger from John Hunton came in on a dead-beat horse a couple minutes after you and Celestino rode out. Hunton's moving out of Cheyenne tomorrow!"

Indecision gripped the Rio Kid for a moment.

It was imperative that he play his part in the scheme to smash the Buckskin Militia. Without his own and Mireles' presence when and if the wagon train about to leave Cheyenne, was raided by the Buckskins, nothing would be gained. Hunton and his gunfighters would certainly break up the attack, but the freighting magnate was depending upon the Rio Kid and his *compadre* to trail the Buckskins to their headquarters after the raid was beaten off.

On the other hand, it was important that Jake Riordan be dealt with. So far as Riordan was concerned, it was a personal matter with the Rio Kid. Too, Riordan had robbed the Randalls and it seemed highly important that their money be recovered. He made his quick decision.

"If I can catch up with Riordan tonight," he said, "and settle with him, I can still get to the wagon train before it reaches the part of the trail where the raids take place. If I don't overtake him by dawn, I'll postpone my hunt for him and head south. But he's not far ahead. I've a hunch Riordan and I will have our showdown tonight."

Calamity Jane saw that his mind was made up.

"You ever traveled this trail before, Cap'n?"

The Rio Kid said that he hadn't. "It leads to a place called Coffin Rock," he said. "That's all I know about it."

"Coffin Rock is wild country," the woman said. "It's there that Riordan will try to bushwhack you, sure."

"Mireles and I will keep our eyes open."

"So'll I, then."

"No, Calamity. You're not riding with us. It's not your fight."

Calamity Jane lifted her reins. "I'm making it my fight," she said bluntly. "You gents follow me, and we'll take those bushwhackers from behind!"

SHE turned off the trail into the timber. It seemed only reasonable for the Rio Kid and Mireles to follow her.

They did, and two hours later, after riding silently through the rough country in inky darkness, they caught Jake Riordan and his two masked companions in their ambush—from behind.

On a signal from Calamity Jane, they dismounted and left their horses in a dense stand of aspen. The mannishly attired Calamity Jane insisted with a gesture on leading the way. The Rio Kid followed her from the trees, through huge slabs of rock that reminded him of bloody Devil's Den at Gettysburg, and Mireles kept close at his heels. Finally they halted, crouched among some boulders. Beyond was a wide ravine.

At first they could see little. There was a moon in the southeastern sky, but it was a dull red and gave no light at all. Gradually, however, the Rio Kid's eyes penetrated the murky gloom of the ravine. The trail they had started upon after leaving Sundog here cut across the ravine, and there was a broad but shallow stream to ford. In the center of the creek, with the water singing softly about it, was an odd rock formation. In size and shape, the portion of the rock exposed above the water resembled a coffin.

Between the spot where the Rio Kid and his companions had halted, their guns in their hands, was a tangle of rocks and brush. In this tangle, watching the trail to the north, were three shadowy figures. Nothing could be seen of the ambushers' mounts. The animals were no doubt hidden deeper in the ravine. The trio were silent, but now and again one or another stirred restlessly.

The Rio Kid gestured at Calamity Jane, ordering her to stay behind cover. Then, with Mireles, he moved toward the ambushers. Their backs were toward him. Had it been their way of fighting, the Rio Kid and Mireles could have shot the three down without any trouble. But back-shooting was not for the Rio Kid and his Mexican partner.

"Cuss it!" one of the three suddenly growled, "it's beginning to look as if he ain't going to show up."

The Rio Kid had a gun in each hand. He thumbed back their hammers.

"He's already here, Riordan!" he said. "Drop your guns!"

The bushwhackers started violently. One yelped with fright, another swore a bitter oath. They whirled, and guns blazed and roared.

One of the masked trio did the sensible thing. He dropped his gun, held his empty hands shoulder high. The other two did the foolhardy, fatal thing. They hadn't one chance in a million. They fired in panic, as they swung around. Consequently, their shots went wild. And they got in no second shots. They went down under the ready guns of the Rio Kid and Mireles, surely targeted.

Those expert guns shifted toward the third man, and the Rio Kid knew, despite the mask on the fellow, that it was Jake Riordan who had surrendered. It occurred to the Rio Kid that perhaps Riordan's surrender was not so sensible, after all. The Army would be glad to get Riordan, a Chief Buckskin. It would be the gallows for Riordan or a long term in military prison.

"Take off that mask, Riordan," the Rio Kid ordered.

Riordan obeyed, pulling the buckskin mask off with an angry jerk. His broad face was stiff with rage. There was no fear in him. Despite the darkness, Pryor could see hatred in Riordan's eyes.

Calamity Jane came up, gazing contemptuously at Riordan.

"Your friends had some nerve, Riordan," she said scornfully. "It was your game, but you threw in your hand. They bluffed it out, and took their losses when their bluff was called."

"Shut up," Riordan growled. "Shut up, you muleskinning female!"

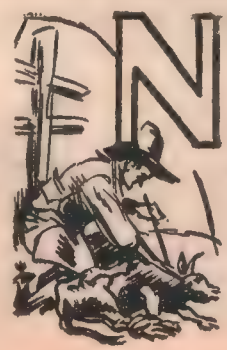
"Name-calling won't get you anything," Calamity Jane retorted. "You're done for, Riordan. Just wait until the Army gets hold of you. You'll pay plenty for the Buckskin Militia flogging officers! And for plenty more! Yeah, you're done for. So is the whole Buckskin bunch. The Militia doesn't know it, but a trap is being laid for the whole no-good crowd. The Militia's headquarters will be surrounded and every mask-wearing Buckskin rounded up!"

It didn't matter, of course, since Riordan was a prisoner, but Calamity Jane was talking too much.

The Rio Kid saw that what she was saying brought a look of desperation to Riordan's face. It was odd, but true. The Rio Kid had seen that same look on Black Jack Mundy's face, and now he saw it on Jake Riordan's. Some of these Buckskins showed less fear for their own hides than for the Militia's safety. The organization had a fanatic hold on some of its members.

CHAPTER XIII

Of the Same Mind



NATURALLY a close watch would have to be kept on Riordan. The Rio Kid knew that. He stepped closer to the prisoner, holstering his left-hand gun.

"I want the Randalls' money, Riordan," he said. He held out his hand.

Riordan was wearing a corduroy coat. He lowered his right hand and pulled a well-filled leather pouch from the coat pocket.

"Take it and be hanged!" Riordan growled. "It was just bait for you, anyway."

He held the pouch out to the Rio Kid. There was a jingle of coins.

The Rio Kid's fingers touched the pouch, but failed to get a grip on it. For Riordan quickly flung it into the Rio Kid's face. The pouch was heavy with specie and dust, and it was thrown with great force. It hit Pryor like the blow of a fist, staggering and blinding him.

Riordan moved like an infuriated cougar then. He leaped at Mireles, drove a savage blow to the Mexican's jaw, knocking him over. Then he whirled and plunged into the rocks and brush. Calamity Jane's gun blasted, but without effect. Riordan hit the creek, splashed across, drove through the brush and scrub trees on the far side.

Recovering, the Rio Kid started after the fleeing man. But by the time he had forded the stream, he realized that he had made a mistake in not going after his horse and riding Riordan down. He had already lost sight of his quarry. He could hear Riordan crashing through the brush, however, and tried to follow him by ear. The dense brush and thick darkness foiled him.

He was halfway across the ravine when he heard a drumming of hoofs. Riordan had reached his horse. The Rio Kid halted, caught a glimpse of his man riding through a rocky cut at the far end of the ravine. He swung his gun up, fired twice, but Riordan disappeared through the cut.

Returning to the others, the Rio Kid saw that Mireles had picked himself up but was still dazed. Calamity Jane looked worried.

"I shouldn't have talked so much," she said. "He'll warn the Militia about the trap. But I didn't figure he'd get away from us. You think we can catch him, Cap'n?"

The Rio Kid shook his head. Riordan had too much of a start, and he wouldn't loiter along the trail this time.

"We'll head back to Deadwood," the Rio Kid said flatly, "then start south along the Cheyenne Trail."

He picked up the heavy leather pouch, intending to return it to the Randalls. He ignored the two dead Buckskins. It was up to Jake Riordan to see that they were buried. He went into the rocks, climbed from the ravine, with Mireles and Calamity Jane coming along behind him. They mounted their horses, headed back toward Deadwood.

The Rio Kid tried to hide his chagrin. Riordan would certainly warn the Militia that its headquarters was in danger, and it was possible that the whole elaborate plan that had been worked out with John Hunton would come to nothing!

In Deadwood, the Rio Kid sent Mireles to buy a spare horse while he went to the Emporium and Calamity Jane went about her own affairs. It was now well past midnight, but Virginia Randall was with Steve Eberts in the back room. Eberts was in bed, and the girl was fussing over him. It was clear that Virginia would take care of the merchant—and quite willingly—until he was recovered from his wound.

Eberts didn't look in bad shape. In fact, there was a contented look on his face. Pryor hid a smile. Any man would be contented if he had a nurse like Virginia. She would have her hands full, however, caring for both Eberts and her brother.

"You caught up with them, Bob?" Eberts asked.

Pryor nodded, handed Virginia the money-filled leather pouch and smiled.

"Captain, I could kiss you!" she cried excitedly.

But his smile faded at once.

"There was a fight," he told Eberts gravely. Two of the robbers were killed. We took Jake Riordan prisoner, but he was a bit too tough. He escaped—after Calamity Jane unthinkingly told him that we have a plan to smash the Buckskin Militia."

Eberts swore, then apologized to Virginia.

"Mireles and I are heading out tonight," the Rio Kid said. "We'll need provisions and camp gear, for there's no telling how long we'll be on the trail, waiting for the raid and tracking the Buckskins afterward, if they pull the raid."

Eberts nodded. "Help yourself to whatever you need," he said. "I only wish I was in shape to ride with you."

PRYOR went out into the store room, lighted a lamp, selected an ax, matches, rope, a tarpaulin, cooking utensils, and enough provisions for two weeks on the trail. He carried the stuff outside, then made up a pack when Mireles showed up with a horse rigged with a pack saddle and on a halter rope.

When the last diamond hitch was tied, the two partners mounted and Mireles caught up the pack horse's lead rope. They headed out the street, and it was as busy as ever despite the lateness of the hour. Like most boom towns, Deadwood never seemed to sleep. The Rio Kid wondered, vaguely uneasy, if any Buckskin spies were watching his and Mireles' departure.

Spies or not, he was sure that the Militia would soon learn that he and his companion were leaving Deadwood. For Russ Mardin came from a honky-tonk with a woman on his arm and saw the two riders.

Mardin signaled. "Leaving town, Captain?"

"That's right."

"For good?"

"Maybe," the Rio Kid drawled. "I'll probably see John Hunton. I'll tell him about your offer."

Mardin smiled. There was a smug look on his florid face. The woman tugged at his arm. He patted her hand.

"Just a minute, Lil," he said. "This is important." He was confident tonight, almost cocky. "Tell him," he said to the Rio Kid, "that it's the only offer I'll ever make him. If he turns it down, he'll have to take the consequences."

"Consequences?" Pryor said. "What consequences?"

"Hunton will find out soon enough, if he refuses my offer," the boss of Territorial Freighting retorted. His smile was gone, his tone was harsh. "One way or another, I'm going to control all the freighting into the Black Hills before winter sets in. I'm tired of waiting, Captain Pryor!"

He nodded curtly, walked on with his woman.

The Rio Kid rode on with Mireles, puzzled by the man's sudden boldness. Mardin either felt certain that John Hunton was whipped, or he suspected that a trap was being laid for the Buckskin Militia—and planned to spring one of his own. Pryor was a little more troubled. Whatever the reason for Mardin's bluntness, a showdown was at hand.

By traveling hard, the Rio Kid and Mireles came up with the Hunton wagon train before it reached Fort Laramie. There were six rigs, mule-drawn wagons and trailers, in the outfit. It appeared to be no more heavily guarded than the trains John Hunton previously had sent along the Black Hills trail. If spied upon by any Buckskins, it would appear to be an easy target for a determined raid. Three horsemen, only, escorted the outfit, the train boss and two gun-guards. That was the number of guards the Buckskin Militia was accustomed to finding with a Hunton train.

But a rifleman was hidden inside each wagon, alert under the bowed canvas top. Riding on past the crawling wagons, the Rio Kid and Mireles saw the fake boomer outfit—two rickety wagons with six men—traveling half a mile behind. Those men would be alert for trouble, too, and would rush forward when the freighting outfit was in trouble.

The Rio Kid and his companion continued south, passing the two outfits with only casual waves of the hand. It seemed certain that the freighting outfit was being spied upon, and the Rio Kid didn't want the Buckskins to see him and Mireles showing undue interest in the wagon train or the boomer outfit behind it.

There were other Black Hills-bound

outfits nearby. Most were genuine boomer outfits manned by gold-seekers, of course, but the Rio Kid would have gambled that one or more was made up of Buckskins who were keeping the Hunton outfit under surveillance. Traveling on southward for several miles, he and Mireles swung eastward. In the low hills, they picked up the tracks of a band of riders. They followed the tracks until dusk and finally came upon Hunton and half a dozen friends making camp. They were making their night halt about two miles east of the trail.

HUNTON shook hands, then introduced the weary riders to his own companions. It was a formidable bunch of men that the freighting magnate had recruited, and the Rio Kid well knew that decent, law-abiding men, though slow to be aroused, made the better fighting men when up against renegades. These men from ranches and Cheyenne business firms were siding Hunton because of friendship and expected no monetary reward, but fight they would.

Pryor and Mireles ate supper with the Hunton crowd, and afterward Pryor told the freighting magnate of the fight at Coffin Rock and Jake Riordan's escape. He also told Hunton of Russ Mardin's offer—and ultimatum. Hunton stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"I can explain Mardin's boldness," he said. "His agent at Cheyenne probably sent a rider to Deadwood with a message as soon as I started loading my wagons." He smiled thinly. "I decided to add a little more bait to the trap, Captain. I spread a rumor around Cheyenne that I'd be ruined if I lost this outfit now on the trail. That's not too far from the truth, by the way. But I wanted Russ Mardin to hear of it, so he'd be sure of ordering the Buckskins to attack. The Territorial Freighting agent at Cheyenne certainly mentioned the rumor in his message to Mardin. Hence Mardin's bluntness when you saw him last."

"Mardin will order a raid, then," the Rio Kid said. "But with Jake Riordan aware that we're laying a trap—"

"Riordan is a hot-headed fool, Captain."

"Fool enough to risk a raid even when he's forewarned?"

"I'd gamble on it," said Hunton. "Besides, Riordan isn't the boss of that bunch. The Militia has four Chief Buckskins, and the other three will vote against Riordan if he should want to hold back. My wagons are loaded with the sort of freight those renegades like for loot, and I'm pretty sure they'll grab at the bait."

"Well, time will tell," the Rio Kid drawled. . . .

The Hunton forces continued northward, the pace set by the mules straining in the traces of the heavy wagons and trailers. Reaching Fort Laramie they saw that the fort was all but deserted. The troops were in the field, moving against the Sioux and Cheyennes, out to avenge Custer's bloody defeat that had occurred two months earlier on the Little Big Horn. Hunton could expect no help from the military in his showdown fight with the Buckskins. To the Army, the hostiles were far more important than the renegade Buckskin Militia.

The North Platte was forded, left behind.

The Hunton forces trailed on to the upper Niobrara, crossed the northwest corner of Nebraska, and the days passed without signs of the masked raiders. They headed into South Dakota, crossed the South Fork, entered the Black Hills.

"Trouble will strike at any time now," the Rio Kid told Mireles.

The two ranged ahead, scouting the country along each side of the trail, yet never drawing so far off that the caravan would be attacked without their knowledge.

The wagon train was crossing the Divide between French Creek and Spring Creek when the partners cut sign of the Buckskins. It was just after sundown. The Rio Kid and Mireles broke from timber upon a slope overlooking the trail. They saw three Territorial rigs rolling southward, traveling

fast because the wagons were empty. A bunch of men emerged from the brush at the side of the trail, and the muleskinners halted their teams while the men climbed into the canvas-sheeted wagons.

There were a dozen men in the band. Each was heavily armed, and each wore a buckskin mask.

The wagons started on again as soon as the last of the men were concealed aboard. The Rio Kid glanced at his *compadre.*

"Looks like Russ Mardin has hit on the same kind of trick we're pulling," he said. "The Buckskins know that the Hunton outfit is close, and they'll attack when the two wagon trains are passing each other. You go warn our outfit, *amigo.*"

"Si, General mio," Mireles murmured, and swung back through the timber, lifting his big black gelding and the pack horse to a lope.

The Rio Kid turned back, too, traveling more slowly. He kept in the timber, where he was well-screened, and watched the Territorial wagons. There was a mirthless grin on his lips, an eager gleam in his blue eyes. Both sides in the freighting trail war were now turning to subterfuge, but the Rio Kid knew that the Buckskin Militia would have to dig deeper into its bag of tricks to win the coming showdown.

The Hunton forces would be warned!

CHAPTER XIV

Rout On the Trail

ONLY half an hour later the two wagon trains were within sight of each other. The Territorial outfit rounded a bend and the Hunton outfit was just ahead. The trail ran through a wild stretch of brush and timber country here, and the Rio Kid was sure that other member of the Militia were hidden somewhere nearby.

The fake boomer outfit was hurriedly overtaking the Hunton freight wagons. Mireles had ridden on to warn John Hunton and his band of gunfighters.

The sun was down, and it was already hazy dusk here in the pine forest. The lead wagons of the two outfits were now only a hundred yards apart, and the Rio Kid drew his Winchester from its scabbard. Saber nickered softly, as though aware that he was soon to see battle again. The Rio Kid decided to throw some confusion into the Buckskins concealed in the Territorial wagons.

He levered a cartridge into the rifle's chamber, swung the weapon to his shoulder. He was still screened by trees, but the range was short. He opened a fast fire on the lead Territorial wagon, pumping his slugs through the canvas sheeting. He heard frightened yells, angry oaths. The muleskinner and his swamper of the targeted wagon hit the ground running.

On the Rio Kid's fourth shot the Buckskins came dropping over the tail-gate. Five of them were flushed from that wagon by the Rio Kid's shooting. And as they scattered for cover, the riflemen guarding the Hunton's outfit opened fire on them.

Hunton's drivers circled their rigs, forming the sort of corral that the emigrant outfits on the Overland Trail used for cover when attacked by Indians. But now a band of riders came from the west, emerging from the pine forest, and charged at the wagon train. There were a dozen in this bunch, too. The other Buckskins in the Territorial wagons appeared, joined their fellows, and the raid was underway.

It was bedlam!

Hit men screamed. Scared men swore, angry men cursed. The charging raiders kept up a wild yelling. Spooked horses shrieked; some began to buck wildly. The Hunton men poured their fire into onrushing riders, and horses with empty saddles galloped one way and another. John Hunton brought his reserve force in from the east, Mireles riding with them, and they added their racketing

gunfire and ringing shouts to the din.

The Rio Kid was having trouble keeping the battle-eager Saber from galloping into the fight. He turned the dun down the slope, crossed the trail behind the Territorial wagons stalled there, and took to the brush and timber on the opposite side. Since the Buckskins had attacked from the west, it was likely that they would flee in that direction. The Rio Kid wanted to be ready to trail the raiders who survived the fight.

Some were already in flight. Four of the masked raiders swerved their horses away from the deadly guns of the wagon train defenders, and took to the brush.

The Rio Kid was ready.

He swung Saber in behind the four, and luckily the thickening darkness masked him. When the panicky four glanced back, they mistook the shadowy figure behind them for another frightened member of the Militia.

The Rio Kid never let the four get out of sight. The tireless Saber easily matched the stride of the Buckskins' racing mounts. When the four got their panic under control and slowed their pace, the Rio Kid held the eager dun war horse in and kept his distance behind so that he would not be recognized if the four Buckskins tried to identify him.

The trail led deep into the wildest sort of country, mile after mile, through pine forests and along rocky slopes. Finally, after a dozen hard miles, the Rio Kid's quarry entered a narrow cut in some jagged rock cliffs. They entered after being challenged by a sentry hidden somewhere in the dark. They gave some password when challenged, then rode on, disappearing from the Rio Kid's sight.

It was evident that the Militia's hideout was located beyond that narrow passage, on the other side of that rocky barrier of cliff walls. The Rio Kid swung off into a clump of scrub trees, waited and watched.

HE finally saw that the sentry was posted in among a jumble of boulders to the right of the entrance to the cut, a position from which he could shoot down any approaching riders who could not give the password. No doubt a shot from the man's gun would serve as a signal to bring the Buckskins to defend the pass.

The Rio Kid heard a drumming of hoofs. Two more survivors of the fight on the freighting trail came loping by, heading for the cut. A minute later another came along. The survivors were straggling home.

The Rio Kid turned back.

There was nothing he could do here, alone. He had accomplished his purpose; his plan had worked. But now he needed help. It would take plenty of determined men to finish the job. After tonight's defeat the Buckskins' spirits would be at low ebb, but it was a certainty that they would fight savagely when cornered.

Riding back to where he had left the Hunton forces, the Rio Kid was forced to conceal himself in the timber several times as Buckskins heading for their hideout loomed through the darkness. One group of five riders passed within ten yards of him, but they were bitterly lamenting their defeat and heavy losses and failed to see the hidden horseman.

The five were riding at a walk, and they seemed to have no fear that they might be followed. Evidently they had made sure that there was no pursuit.

"I'm telling you hombres that we'll never whip Hunton," the Rio Kid heard one Buckskin growl. "He's getting stronger, not weaker. Me, I'm for quitting this freight trail war and letting that slick Russ Mardin fight it out alone. What's it getting us? Nothing but hot lead, and a lot of freight cached away. I'm for going after dust. Those miners are just waiting to be robbed. We could get enough loot in one raid to—"

They passed on, out of the Rio Kid's hearing.

He continued toward the trail. . . .

Hunton and his men, with Celestino Mireles' help, had shot down nine of the raiders. All the downed Buckskins were dead. If there had been wounded, they had made their escape. No prison-

ers had been taken. The Rio Kid figured that if the Militia consisted of fifty members, it was likely that, taking into consideration the losses here and at Coffin Rock, a force of nearly forty renegades would be found at the hideout.

He told John Hunton of the pass into the hideout, of how it was guarded, and of his estimate of the number of Buckskins there.

"It's up to you, John," he said. "And to your friends. If we can take them by surprise, the odds won't count for much. If we're discovered outside the pass, we may be caught in a gun-trap from which none of us will escape. But I'd say we should take the chance—run the risk. We'll reach the hideout in about three hours of easy riding. By that time the renegades should be bedded down and asleep except for what sentries they keep posted."

The other men were gathered close, listening.

"Let's finish this thing tonight," one of them said. He spoke for them all.

There were more than a score of them. The riflemen who had been concealed in the freight wagons had caught up and mounted riderless Buckskin horses. The men from the fake boomer outfit had unharnessed the horses from their wagons. They had carried saddles in the two rickety wagons. They rode west in a column, with the Rio Kid, Mireles and Hunton in the lead.

They rode as silently as possible.

They rode with their rifles across their saddles.

It was a job for Mireles—and his knife. The Rio Kid halted the column at the base of a timbered slope a quarter of a mile from the pass in the cliffs. He pointed out the boulders near the pass entrance in which the sentry was posted, and Mireles volunteered to silence the Buckskin on guard.

"Ees easy for me, General," he whispered.

The Mexican slipped from the saddle, went on afoot, disappearing through the darkness. It seemed an eternity that he was gone, though it could not have been longer than half an hour. No sound was heard during the period of waiting. Then Mireles returned.

"He grabbed for his gun when I came up behind him, General," he said, low-voiced. He shrugged. "He will never draw a gun again."

THE Rio Kid smiled grimly.

He lifted his hand in the familiar cavalry signal to advance, swinging the arm forward, and the column of vengeance-seekers rode toward the narrow cut in the cliffs—to what, they did not know. It could be an easy victory. Or a bloody defeat.

The pass was simply a great crevice in the cliffs, caused by some violent upheaval of the earth eons ago. It was wide enough for a wagon and team to have entered at the mouth, but at places it narrowed so that a rider could touch both walls at once with his elbows. It curved sharply twice. It was inky dark in the passage, and the riders knew what it was like to be blind. They rode with their hearts in their mouths, for the clatter of shod hoofs in that cramped space seemed like thunder. After perhaps two hundred yards, the passage opened into a canyon—and there was the Buckskin Militia's headquarters.

It was a small canyon, no more than a thousand feet across and perhaps a half mile in length. Its walls were sheer cliffs, five or six hundred feet high.

"Unless there's another exit, we've got them!" the Rio Kid exulted.

Moonlight and the glare of a high-blazing campfire illuminated the camp. Half a dozen men were hunkered down about the fire. They no doubt were supposed to be on guard duty, ready to man the passage upon a warning shot from the sentry posted outside. But they had a keg of whisky set up by the fire, and were drinking heavily. A large number of men were bedded down in scattered spots beyond the fire.

There was a pole corral in which the Buckskins' horses were held.

There were what appeared to be on first glance large buildings, a half dozen of them. The Rio Kid soon saw that they were crude shelters, canvas tar-

paulins stretched on tall poles to form roofs. In these shelters were stacked great quantities of cases, boxes, sacks, barrels, kegs—loot from John Hunton's freight wagons. Thousands of dollars' worth of the provisions and supplies needed so badly by the citizens of Deadwood and the other Black Hills camps. A fortune in loot.

The Rio Kid used gestures to order four of his men to guard the pass, block it against any of the Buckskins trying to escape. He led the others on toward the camp.

One of the men at the fire rose to tap the whisky keg. He happened to look toward the pass entrance. He stared, mouth falling agape, tin cup dropping from his hand. His mouth worked, but no sound came at first. Then he yelled.

The Rio Kid's voice was no easy drawl now. It had the snap of a whiplash, commanding: "Stay as you are, hombres! You're covered!"

The Buckskin's yell had aroused the camp, however. The five still at the fire jumped up, grabbing their guns. The bedded-down men, torn from sleep, were slower in getting into action. But they, too, grabbed for their guns. There was no chance of a surrender demand being heeded. The Rio Kid did not utter one. He reached for his Colts, and his companions were already pouring a heavy fire into the renegades. It was more of a wild mêlée than a stand-up fight.

Men caught so completely off guard were half-beaten from the first shot. Too, the behavior of most of the trapped Buckskins was confused and panicky. It was clear to the Rio Kid as his twin Colts blazed that the renegades were as befuddled from a night of drinking as from surprise. No doubt the entire bunch had been trying earlier to drown the memory of the evening's defeat in whisky. Some staggered as they tried to stand and shoot, others reeled and stumbled as they tried to flee.

But it was a savage, if a confused fight, and some of the Rio Kid's companions were killed and others wounded. The battle ranged all through the box canyon; through rocks and brush and scrub trees, across a shallow stream, around the shelters in which the loot was piled. There was no way out of the canyon except through the narrow pass, for not even terrified men could climb those cliffs. The four men guarding the passage fired on every Buckskin who tried to escape.

Finally the renegades began to throw away their weapons and lift empty hands. Some were so badly shaken that they cried out like beggars, asking the vengeance riders not to kill them.

The Rio Kid and his companions rode one way and another gathering up prisoners. Some of the Buckskins would not surrender even when cornered, but went down fighting. The four Chief Buckskins—Jake Riordan, Matt Boland, Mitch Wall, Jim Robles—were tricky to the last. As the fight went against the renegades, those four leaders eluded the attackers and hid in one of the loot shelters. They did no shooting. As the battle moved farther back into the canyon, they caught up horses from which Hunton men had been shot. Mounting, they galloped toward the pass entrance.

A savage fight occurred there. Two Hunton men were killed, one wounded. The Buckskins, Boland, Wall, and Robles were shot down. But Jake Riordan got through. Riordan got into the pass, and galloped away.

The Rio Kid rode up in time to see the man make his escape.

CHAPTER XV

The Real Pay-Off

PRYOR realized that it would be foolhardy to plunge into the cut after Riordan. The fleeing man could have halted by one of the bends in the passage and picked off any number of pursuers, just by listening for their approach in the inky

darkness that enveloped them.

The Rio Kid let Riordan go. The man could be hunted down later. He was sure that Riordan would ride straight to Deadwood, to tell Russ Mardin the bad news.

"I'll give him plenty of start," the Rio Kid told himself. Then go after him."

He wanted to catch Riordan and Mardin together, anyway.

The shooting was over. Except for an occasional harsh order spoken to the prisoners, the canyon was silent. A couple of the victors built up the fire, so that there was sufficient light to keep close watch on the captives. There were twenty-two prisoners in one bunch, seven wounded prisoners in another bunch. Five of John Hunton's men had been killed, and two were wounded. It had been a bloody fight and a hard won victory, but the Buckskin Militia was smashed.

The Rio Kid told Hunton that Riordan had escaped.

"Mireles and I will hunt him down," he added. "I figure he'll head for Deadwood, to give Russ Mardin the bad news. With luck, we'll catch them together. And if we do . . . Well, we'll have proof enough that Mardin was directing the raids."

"Take some of the boys with you, Captain," Hunton urged.

"No," said the Rio Kid, smiling thinly. "Riordan is my game. From start to finish, this has been a personal feud between Riordan and me. I'll take care of him."

He and Mireles shook hands with Hunton, waved farewell to the men who had fought so valiantly at their side. They turned their horses, headed for the pass in the rock cliffs. Hunton and his men could turn their prisoners over to the Army as criminals. They could pack out the recovered loot on the Buckskin Militia's horses. The Rio Kid and Mireles still had a vengeance trail to follow.

They rode hard, the Rio Kid on his tough-sinewed Saber and Mireles on his fine black gelding, and they cut through the hills in the most direct route to Deadwood. They knew that Riordan would waste no time along the way.

"Why ees *El General* so sure Senor Riordan will head for Deadwood?" Mireles said once. "A man fleeing for his life should go into hiding."

"Riordan isn't really scared, *amigo*."

"You theenk not, General?"

"He's too tough to know fear," the Rio Kid answered. "And I figure he has good reason to want to contact Russ Mardin before he goes into hiding. Riordan was a Buckskin, all right—a Chief Buckskin. But he was really Mardin's man. He was Mardin's contact with the Militia. Now he'll want to collect his pay-off. Without a doubt, Riordan expected to cash in heavily for working with Mardin. Failure won't stop him from trying to collect at least a part of what Mardin promised."

"Si!" said Mireles. "A pay-off, eh?"

They pounded into Deadwood in the still darkness just before dawn. It was at that period when the rowdy camp came closest to being asleep. Some of the saloons, gambling houses and honky-tonks were still open and doing business, but most of the town was dark and few men were on the street.

A light burned in the office at the Territorial wagon yard. And a lathered, blowing horse stood before the plank building.

Riordan's horse.

Reining in, the Rio Kid glanced through the office window and had a glimpse of Jake Riordan and Russ Mardin. Mardin sat at his desk. Riordan stood before the desk, talking angrily, shaking his fist at Territorial Freighting's owner. The Rio Kid saw Riordan swing about, grabbing for his guns. The last of the Buckskins had heard the two riders. Riordan jerked open the door, peered out.

He identified the two riders, swore bitterly, fired two wild shots, then slammed the door.

"You're trapped, Riordan!" the Rio Kid shouted. "Drop your guns, and come out with your hands up! Bring Mardin with you!"

Gunshots crashed again. Window panes shattered explosively.

THE Rio Kid dismounted, slapped Saber so that the dun would move out of harm's way. He withdrew to one side of the window through which the berserk Riordan continued to fire. Mireles swung his black to the other corner of the building, dismounted, and started shooting through the closed door.

The Rio Kid's Colts began to crash. One of his slugs struck the oil lamp on Mardin's desk, upset it, knocked it to the floor. Coal oil spilled, ignited from the still burning wick, and the ruddy glow of flames replaced the yellowish lamplight. The glow became a bright glare as the blaze spread.

Crouching low, shooting through the window, the Rio Kid had a glimpse of Russ Mardin beating at the flames with his coat. Riordan was ignoring the flames. He matched the Rio Kid's gunfire, shot for shot. But he and Mardin were trapped. The office had but one window and one door. The two side walls and the rear wall were solid, without exits. The flames would soon force them into the street.

The Rio Kid yelled a warning to Mireles to be on guard.

"They'll come out shooting, sure!" he called.

He had no sooner spoken than the door was jerked open and Russ Mardin came rushing out. At the same instant Riordan began a heavier fire from the window, pinning the Rio Kid down. Mardin had a gun in his hand, a crazed look on his face. He caught Mireles in the act of reloading his gun. Mardin fired at the Mexican. Mireles fell as he tried to duck. He was unhit, but at Mardin's mercy.

Mardin leaped toward Mireles's black horse, intending to mount it, at the same time aiming for a second shot at the fallen man. The Rio Kid exposed himself to Riordan's gun to shoot at Mardin, and missed. Then Saber shrilled a warning as he raced to attack Mardin. The dun war horse reared high above Mardin. His fore hoofs struck the man squarely in the face. Mardin screamed and crumpled to the ground.

The Rio Kid shifted his gun toward the window again, fired two quick shots, heard Jake Riordan cry out. Riordan was gone from the window then, and his guns were silent. For an instant the only sounds were the roar and crackle of the flames.

The Rio Kid ran to the enraged Saber, caught the reins, and pulled the horse away from its victim. He was too late. Mardin was dead.

A crowd had gathered. It was swelling by the second. All Deadwood was aroused. Sheriff Bullock arrived, demanded to know what was going on, and he nodded grimly when the Rio Kid explained.

The building was now a mass of flames. The fire was leaking through the walls, eating through the roof, and smoke billowed high.

Then a cry of "Help! Help me!" rose above the roar of the flames. It was Jake Riordan shouting. Wounded, not dead as the Rio Kid had believed, Riordan was lying helpless in that fiery inferno. A gasp went up from the crowd.

It was one thing to see a man die with a gun in his hand, another to visualize him in danger of burning to death.

The Rio Kid did not consider that Riordan was his mortal enemy, a man who would have killed him without mercy. He holstered his guns, leaped toward the flame-filled doorway. He shielded his face with his arms. It was like plunging into a furnace. The heat struck him like a fist. Flames swept at him. Smoke shrouded him, and he choked on it.

The Rio Kid stumbled into a chair, kicked it aside. He collided with a desk, reeled away. He saw Riordan crouching in the corner beyond the window, the one small space still not afire.

There was a wicked grin on Riordan's face.

There was a gun in his fist, cocked and leveled.

Alarm knifed through the Rio Kid as he saw how he had been tricked. Rior-

dan was not wounded. The man knew that he faced the gallows if he gave himself up. So he had chosen to stay in that fiery place. But his hatred for Bob Pryor was so strong that he wanted to take the Rio Kid with him!

"Fooled you, eh?" Riordan shouted. "Fooled you, eh?"

He slowly rose from his crouch, a madman.

The Rio Kid saw only one chance. As a puff of flames and smoke billowed up between him and Riordan, he leaped headlong for the window. He crashed against the already shattered sash. It fell away, and he fell through to the street. Behind him Riordan cursed wildly, and fired two quick shots. The Rio Kid landed on his left side. He grabbed out his right-hand Colt, and fired from where he lay as Riordan tried to shoot him from the flame-rimmed window. There was no doubting that Riordan was hit this time. The Rio Kid's shot caught him between the eyes. As Riordan's body fell back from the window, the blazing roof caved in with an explosive roar.

IT was early morning, and Steve Eberts' clerks were opening the Emporium for another day's business. The merchant came outside to see the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles off. Eberts had recovered from his wound except for a limp. In time, he would walk normally again. He knew that the Buckskin Militia was smashed, that Jake Riordan and Russ Mardin were dead, and the merchant side of him was cheerful this morning. Otherwise, he regretted that Pryor and Mireles were proper sort of way.

"I'd hope you'd stay for the wedding," he said. "It'll be a real shindig, in a sort of way."

"Virginia said 'yes?'" the Rio Kid asked, surprised. Then he realized that he should not have found it surprising news. "Congratulations, Steve!" he exclaimed. "She's a lovely girl."

"Dick is coming into the Emporium as my partner."

"That's a sensible arrangement. You can make a merchant of him."

"The wedding will be early next month."

The Rio Kid nodded. "Celestino and I will try to make it," he said. "But we can't give you our word for it. There's no telling where we'll be by then." He flashed his devil-may-care smile. "We may be riding another vengeance trail at that time, Steve."

They rode out, then, away from Deadwood.

They took the southward trail, along which the great freight rigs would roll again, unmolested. Time would dim the memory of the bloody fights that had won the freighting trail war. But there would be some men who would always remember the part played by the Rio Kid and his Mexican *compadre* in winning the victory.

South they rode, the blue-clad Captain Bob Pryor and the gaudily attired Celestino Mireles. Without fear of ambush.

They would now have to look elsewhere for the adventure upon which they thrived.

Bob Pryor Tangles With the Gun-Lords of a Turbulent Town

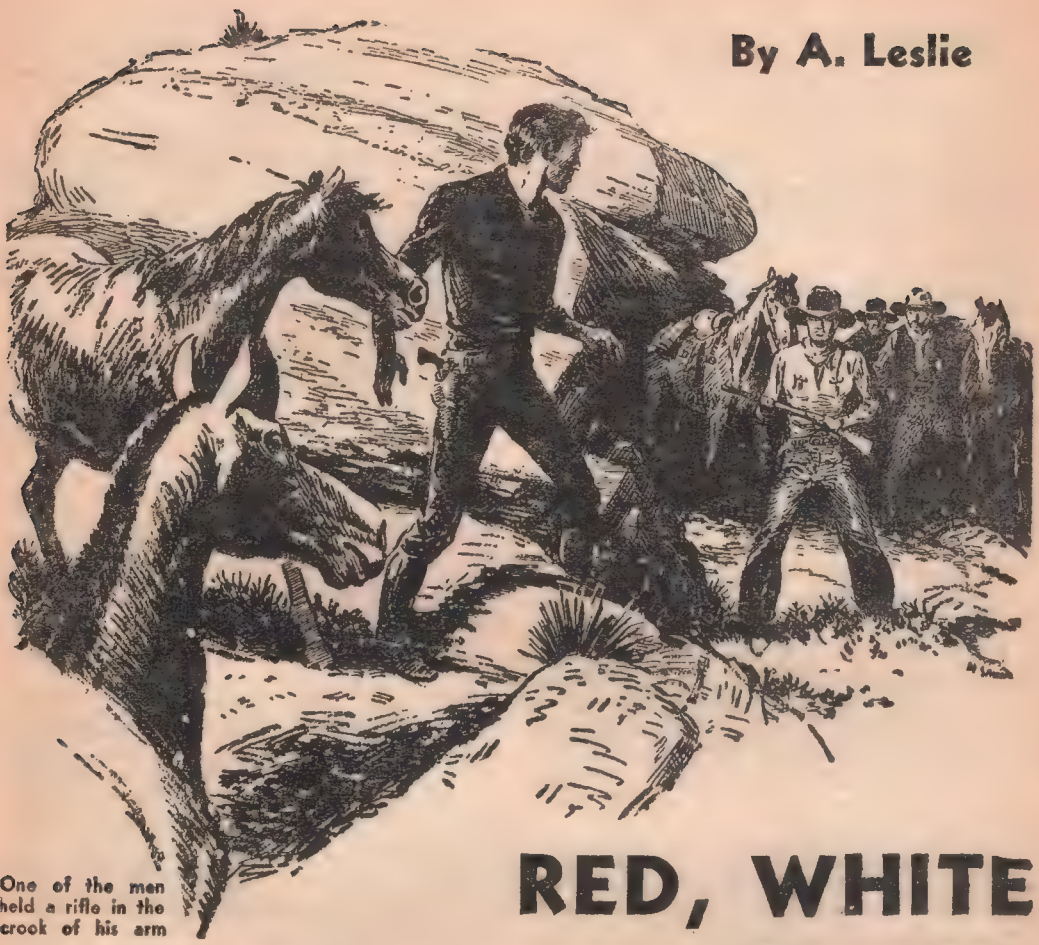
RAIDERS OF DEADWOOD

Another Exciting Complete RIO KID Novel

By TOM CURRY

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE!

By A. Leslie



One of the men held a rifle in the crook of his arm

RED, WHITE *and* BLACK

Jim Grant, Kep and L'il Mose face seemingly unsurmountable obstacles together to win out against gunsmoke and prejudice!

WHEN the iron men of Spain rode out of Mexico in search of gold and conquest, the Big Bend country of Texas was the rock on which the river of steel split in the course of its northward flow. East and west the Spaniards left an impress that would continue to make itself felt for centuries.

The desolation of the Big Bend they left practically untouched. That desolation remains much the same today as when Coronado followed, across Texas and beyond, the shadows of a dream that was El Dorado, the Gran Quivera and the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola.

It is a land of mountain, canyon and mesa. The vegetation is the greasewood, coarse chino grass, Spanish dagger, thorned brush and the cactus in a thousand varieties. Cattle graze over vast stretches. The mountains are rich in mineral, largely untapped by the min-

er's pick. There is much underground water waiting for the drill. But above ground it is a dry land. A certain *tinaja*, at which a man and a horse can get a drink, is famed two hundred miles away.

So Jim Grant, squatting over the fire he had built near the rock waterhole, was not surprised when a horseman topped a nearby rise and rode in his direction. The "horse," incidentally, was a mule, and behind it ambled a second mule bearing a pack-sack, which was well filled out.

Grant waved a hand. The approaching rider waved back. As he drew near, he showed a high-nosed face of a coppery redness, keen black eyes and a rather wide, humorous-looking mouth. He was stocky and powerful in build with arms abnormally long for his height.

"Indian," Grant muttered to himself. "Full-blood Yaqui, I'd say, from the looks of him.

"Howdy?" he shouted aloud. "Light off and cool your saddle. Chuck's about ready. Fried deer meat, but that's all."

"Smells prime," the redman replied in perfect English as he drew up beside the waterhole. "No bread, eh? Well, I can take care of that. I got flour, a big poke. No meat."

"Now that sounds like something," Grant applauded. "Some dough cakes will make this venison go down a heap easier. Run your critters over to the thicket the other side of the rocks with my horse and pack mule. Good grass there."

The Indian dismounted lithely, rooted in his pack-sack and brought forth a sack of flower and a bread pan.

"I'll mix it while you take care of the critters," Grant volunteered.

He busied himself with the bread. The Indian returned shortly, squatted on his heels nearby and rolled a shuck cigarette. He glanced up abruptly.

"Somebody else comes, from the east," he remarked.

GRANT screwed his head over his shoulder and observed a third rider approaching, driving before him two droop-eared, hypocritically meek burros.

"By golly, a colored feller!" Grant exclaimed. "Don't see many of 'em over this way. And is he black! He'd make a prime headlight for a snow storm. Say! we're gettin' quite a color combination together here!" The Indian chuckled with him. The Negro swiftly drew near. Grant waved a greeting.

"Hi-ya, gents?" shouted the new arrival in a deep and richly musical voice.

"Light and squat," Grant called back. "Mighty nigh ready for a surroundin'."

The black man rode up and dismounted. He sniffed the fragrant aroma of frying meat and baking bread.

"Hey, how come?" he asked. "No coffee?"

"Reckon you'll hafta do without java this time," Grant replied.

The other shook his head vigorously. "What we just ain't goin' to do," he chuckled. "I got plenty."

He flopped the packs from his burros and began digging into one.

"This is gettin' plumb perfect," declared Grant. "Now if some gent will just amble up with cream and sugar, we're all set."

"I got sugar," said the colored man. "Cream I ain't got."

"We'll pass that up till we find a cow," Grant agreed cheerfully. He reached for the other's coffee pot and dipped water from the spring. The Negro unsaddled his big bony bay and led it over to graze with the Indian's mule and Grant's tall sorrel. The burros sadly followed.

Soon the oddly assorted trio sat down to an appetizing meal. Jim Grant introduced himself over the skillet.

"I'm Kepnau," said the Indian, "otherwise known as Bob Stone. My dad was named Mukwarrah. That means, in our Yaqui tongue, a tall cliff. When Dad moved up into Texas he decided he'd better take a name like other folks, so he translated it into Stone. Named me Robert when I happened along a few years later. But the native name he gave me sort of stuck. Most everybody calls me Kep."

"That's okay by me," said Grant. "And how about you, feller?"

"Well," chuckled the black man, filling the coffee cups, "my grandpappy was a slave and he belonged to old John Wagner, over in Louisiana. Mistuh Wagner freed his slaves long before the war, and they all took the name of Wagner. More black Wagners over there now than white ones. They all stayed on with Marse John, as they called him. Never left.

"Only difference bein' free was that Marse John paid 'em wages and they had to do their own worryin', 'stead of leavin' it all to Marse John. My old pappy still lives over there on the plantation—he's pushin' ninety now but still goin' strong. They called him Big Mose Wagner, and called me Little Mose."

Grant leaned back and laughed aloud as he ran his eyes over Wagner's stalwart six-foot-two.

"Your dad sure must have been sort of high up in the world if they called you Little Mose," he declared.

Wagner's white teeth showed in a wide grin. "Three inches over five feet and weighs a hundred and twenty pounds," he chuckled, "but just the same he's Big Mose."

"Where you fellers headin' for?" Grant asked, and swallowed a bit of venison with great relish.

Kepnau shrugged with Latin expressiveness. Wagner encompassed the horizon with a wave of his big hands.

"I've been tappin' rocks and rootin' into gravel banks for the past year," volunteered the redman. "There's metal in these hills, if a feller is just lucky enough to sink a pick into it. So far I've been making just about day wages, but I'm still hoping."

"Reckon I'm about in the same corral," Grant nodded. "I was ridin' for a spread up to the north of the Bend country. A couple of jiggers showed up with some hefty pokes of nuggets and dust they said they got down here. My job was peterin' out and I decided, what the heck! ought to do better than forty-per down there, and 'lowed to give it a whirl. I studied considerable about minin' and such in school before Dad lost his holdin's in the big drought and blizzard five years back. Reckon I didn't learn enough, though. Haven't had much luck so far. How about you, Mose?"

"Pappy was a brick and stone mason," explained Wagner. "Made me one, too. I worked at it considerable but got itchy feet and started amblin'. Down in Laredo I runs into a feller who 'lowed he'd picked up chunks of gold over here big as his head. Decided I'd oughta be able to do a little pickin', too. Bought me a horse and a couple of them little donkeys and lit out. Beginnin' to think maybe that feller picked up all there was."

Jim Grant pondered over the rim of his coffee cup. "Fellers," he said at length, "I got a notion. None of us 'pears to have been doin' much good goin' it alone. What say, suppose we sort of herd up and make a try together?"

"I think it's a prime motion," Kepnau instantly complied. "As you say, we haven't had much luck alone."

"How about you, Mose?" Grant asked.

"I'm in favor of it," said Wagner. "Gets sort of lonesome, amblin' around with nobody to talk to but them jackasses."

"Besides," observed Kepnau, "if we did happen to strike on something worthwhile, three together would be a heap safer than one man by himself. This is Apache country, and they don't like nobody, to say nothing of raiding parties coming up from Mexico."

"And this is hole-in-the-wall country for salty gents from all over," Grant added. "Plenty maverickin' around here that would kill you for a sack of beans or an old skillet. Okay, from now on were're partners."

The partnership was ratified by a handshake all around and was never put in writing. Though it lasted for years and involved the handling of a very large amount of money in the course of time, it rested wholly on honor, and the trust was never violated by any of the three.

THE sun had vanished behind the western crags by the time the cleaning up was finished. The sky was scarlet and gold shot with spears of amethyst and bronze. To the east bulked the Chisos Mountains, high, serrated, many-colored, misty and unreal. To the east and south were the Carmen Mountains of Mexico, looming beyond the Rio Grande in velvety red, rose and crimson.

As the light died, the tremulous hues dulled and softened, but the outlines of the mighty precipice of solid rock stretching east and west made a weird silhouette against the darkening desert sky. It seemed to take on the form of a man stretched in repose, feet thirty miles from its head, hands folded over the chest, a shapely chin, straight nose and perfect brow—the War God of the Rio Grande taking his rest under the stars.

To the west and not many miles distant was a range of jagged hills that interested Jim Grant.

"Suppose we have a look-see at those rocks tomorrow?" he suggested. His companions nodded agreement.

"And now, seein' that's settled, I vote we turn in," Grant went on. "These rocks are nice and warm now from the fire, and it gets cold at night this time of the year. We'd better spread our blankets here. If you fellers will root 'em out, I'll bring the critters down to drink. We'll have to dip for them, they can't reach into that hole."

Wagner moved toward the packs, but the canny redman vetoed Grant's suggestion.

"Not here," he said. "Not good. This is a bad section and everybody who passes this way, day or night, stops at this hole. We might not like the sort of visitors we could get, especially if they snuk up while we were asleep. Better not to take chances. Better to spread our blankets in the thicket over the other side of the rock pile."

"Plenty of savvy, feller," Grant approved. "We'll just do that."

"'Sides, it'll be softer sleepin' on the ground with plenty of dry leaves 'stead of on those rocks," Wagner added as he began collecting the blankets. Soon there was silence save for the contented cropping of the livestock.

Jim Grant awoke with a start. The strengthening light of dawn was flowing over the wastelands. For a moment he lay wondering what could have aroused him so suddenly. Then he saw the loom of Flame, his big sorrel, close to the edge of the thicket.

"Darn old grass burner must have kicked over a rock," he decided.

His companions were still sleeping, so Grant eased quietly out of his blankets, drew on his boots and stood up.

"Might as well take the critters down for a drink," he muttered. "Come on, Flame, you and Lop-ear get the first helpin'."

He headed for the waterhole, the sorrel and the mule obediently following. He rounded the east end of the clump of rock and halted abruptly. Standing beside the waterhole were three men watching his approach. A fourth man was fumbling with the saddle pouch of one of four horses near the west end of the rock clump.

A single glance was enough to tell Jim Grant that he was on a spot. He thought he had never seen more villainous looking faces. One of the men held a rifle in the crook of his arm, the hammer at full cock, and the barrel wavered menacingly toward Grant's breast.

"Howdy?" he greeted casually. The man beside the horses turned quickly, hand dropping to his holster. The others did not return the greeting. There was a moment of tense silence, then the man with the rifle nodded, and spoke.

"Feller," he remarked, "I've sure took a notion to that yellow horse."

Grant stared at him a moment, then threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"Feller," he whooped, "there ain't enough dinero in the world to buy old Flame."

"I didn't say nothin' about buyin'," the other countered grimly.

Grant's eyes widened. "You mean you figure to take him?" he demanded loudly.

"Reckon that's about it," the other drawled.

"But feller," Grant pleaded, playing for time and desperately hoping his companions had been awakened by his bellow and understood what was going on, "but feller, I can't get along without a horse."

"Reckon you won't be needin' one any more," the owlhoot observed. His rifle barrel moved the merest trifle as he spoke.

Grant knew it was showdown. He tensed before going for his gun, although he never expected to clear leather.

At that instant a voice rang out: "Elevate!"

UTTERING startled curses, the owlhoots whirled at the sound. At the edge of the rock clump stood Kepnau, a rifle trained on the group by the spring. Grant whipped his own gun from its sheath and covered the man beside the horses.

"Don't make a move, or it'll be your last," Kepnau warned, taking a step forward. His foot came down on a loose stone that rolled and he floundered off balance for a moment, his rifle barrel jerking wildly. The men by the spring instantly went for their guns.

Jim Grant's Colt flicked sideward.

Smoke spurted from the muzzle. One of the owlhoots coughed chokingly and slumped to the ground. Kepnau's rifle boomed as the other two pulled trigger. A second man went down. At the same instant the man by the horses fired and Kepnau fell, to lie motionless.

Grant's last bullet smashed the shoulder of the remaining man by the spring. He reeled back with a shrill yell, his gun falling from his nerveless hand. The man beside the horses took deliberate aim at Grant.

Around the west end of the rock clump bounded a giant figure. Huge black hands closed on the owlhoot's neck and jerked him to one side. His gun exploded in the air. He flailed at Wagner's head with the barrel and the pair went down, writhing and struggling. The wounded man whirled and ran for the horses as Grant's gun hammer clicked on an empty shell. Grant leaped after him but the owlhoot forked a horse and went racing away to the south, reeling in the saddle and clutching the horn for support.

Wagner scrambled to his feet and glanced down at the quivering form on the ground.

"Busted his neck," he panted.

Grant ran to where Kepnau lay and knelt beside him.

"Bad hurt?" Wagner panted as he joined Grant.

"Just creased," the cowboy replied thankfully. "Slug barely busted the skin above his temple. Get some water. We'll bring him out of it in a minute."

Before Wagner returned with the water, Kepnau groaned and opened his eyes. "Take it easy, feller," Grant cautioned. "Here, have a drink."

Kepnau drank, rubbed his head with a shaking hand and with Grant's assistance got to his feet.

"What in blazes is it all about?" he demanded in bewildered tones. "I heard you talking to them and realized something wasn't right."

"Just some of those *muy malo hombres* you were talkin' about last night, that's all," Grant returned grimly. "Much obliged for your quick thinkin', feller. I figured my number was up. And you hogtied that hellion over there just in time, Mose. My gun was empty."

"Sure hogtied him, all right," Kepnau nodded. "Head's twisted 'round till he's looking at the back of his own neck. Feller, you don't know yourself how strong you are. Suppose we look over those bodies. Might learn something about who they are."

This suggestion was acted on. While Grant and Kepnau examined the bodies, Wagner gave the horses and their equipment a onceover.

"Hellions are sure well heeled with dinero," Grant said as he shook a shower of gold pieces from a pocket. Kepnau's reply was drowned by an astounded yelp from Wagner.

"Lawdy! lawdy!" the colored man shouted. "These saddlepokes are plumb stuffed with gold money!"

His companions hurried to join him.

"Gosh a'mighty!" Grant exclaimed a moment later. "There's thousands and thousands of dollars here, in new twenties! What in blazes?"

"Stolen," Kepnau remarked grimly. "No doubt of that. This bunch must have held up a bank or something."

"What in blazes are we going to do with it?" wondered Grant.

"Find a lawman and hand it over

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to him," Wagner instantly replied. "Don't want to be packin' no stole money around."

"You're right there, feller," Grant agreed. "But, blazes! It's better than seventy miles of hard goin' up to Marton, the county seat. We can't go traipsin' up there right away. We want to give those hills a once-over while our chuck holds out."

Kepnau offered a suggestion.

"Suppose we bury it in the thicket and leave it for a spell," he said. "We'll have to renew supplies before long. We'll do that at Marton, and when we pass this way we'll dig up the stuff and take it along with us."

"That's a notion," agreed Grant. "We'll do that. And then we'll rustle a bite to eat and hightail out of here before that horned toad who got away comes back with some more of the same kind. I begin to understand things, now. Couldn't help but wonder why they figured to do in a perfect stranger. They didn't want any witnesses to tell which way they went. And I bet one of those horses is lame."

"You're right about that," said Kepnau. "One has a bullet hole through his leg. I'll try and patch it up a mite while you fellers 'tend to the other things. What about the bodies?"

"Crevices in those rocks," said Grant. "We'll drop 'em in and dump some stones in on top of 'em. Can't leave 'em lyin' around here to foul the waterhole."

CAREFULLY they counted the gold, including what they took from the dead owlhoots' pockets, before burying it. Grant whistled when the amounts were tabulated.

"Fifty-one thousand dollars and a little over!" he marvelled. "They sure made a haul, all right."

They hurriedly threw together a meal, packed up and left the waterhole, heading west toward the distant range of hills.

Evening found them at the base of the hills. They made their camp on the bank of a little stream and the following morning began their explorations.

"Looks good," Grant said. "Those rocks are quartz, all right. We may hit on somethin' worthwhile."

But as the days passed, Grant was forced to revise his estimate. They panned a little free gold from the streams but nowhere did they find anything really worth working. His companions grew gloomy and voiced the opinion that it would be better to seek a new field of operations. But Grant persuaded them to stick around a little longer.

Nearly a week after their arrival at the hills, they threaded a narrow, deep canyon down which flowed a rushing stream. As they penentrated the canyon's depths, the encroaching cliffs gradually changed color from gray to brown. Here and there they became streaked with broad veins of a brilliant red occasionally flecked with black. Kepnau and Wagner shook their heads, but the oddly colored cliffs excited Grant's interest. He chipped at the reddish veins, examined the results with care. His eyes began to glow.

"Fellers," he said at length, in a strained voice, "I believe we've hit it."

His companions stared at him in bewilderment.

"But this rock isn't quartz," Kepnau protested. "It's sandstone. Nobody ever found gold or silver in a sandstone outcropping."

"That's right," agreed Grant, "but there are other things besides gold and silver. I studied geology and petrology, the science of rocks, in school. And unless I'm a heap mistook, I know what this red stuff is. It's cinnabar."

"What's that?" asked Wagner.

"Cinnabar is the ore from which mercury—quicksilver—is obtained," Grant explained. "If it is cinnabar, and I'm plumb certain it is, there's a fortune here in these cliffs. All we got to do is get it out. We'll need to build a furnace to roast the ore after we get it down. That's how you free the quicksilver from the gangue of the ore. Gold and silver miners everywhere use quicksilver to amalgamate the precious metal, and it has lots of other uses, such as making medicine and so on. We can sell every ounce we can get, for a rattling good price, in Marton."

The interest of his companions quickened at his words.

"How about the furnace you spoke of?" Kepnau asked. "How is it built?"

"We'll have to build it of stone blocks cemented together," Grant explained. "We build it with a curved roof, like a dome, with a vent at the top to let the smoke out. Inside there must be a grid

arrangement on which the ore rests. The fire is built under the grid. The quicksilver roasts out and trickles down and is collected by way of channels constructed at the base of the furnace."

"Building that furnace won't be no chore for me," said Wagner. "Rec'lect I told you I'm a stone mason. But I don't know what I'll do for mortar. Sure wish I had some lime or cement."

"I've got a notion about that," said Kepnau. "Blood mixed with powdered rock and sand makes a plumb good cement. Hardens like iron. My people, the Yaquis, always used it."

"No trouble to get the blood," said Grant. "Plenty of deer and antelope in these hills, and we'll need their skins to make rawhide pokes to pack the metal in till we can buy some proper flasks. But I sure wish we had something to make a smoke pipe of. Otherwise we'll lose an awful lot of metal. With a smoke pipe leading from the chimney vent and running through a tank of water, we'd get a heap of metal from the vapor."

"Easy to build a tank," observed Wagner.

"And I got a notion about the smoke pipe," said Kepnau. "Instead of one we'll use several, made of sotol stalks with the pith shoved out. My people use 'em to convey water."

"Say, this is workin' out fine!" exulted Grant. "Fellers, we'll get rich yet. Let's get busy."

AT length under Wagner's skillful hands, the furnace quickly took shape, built of boulders from the creek-bed, of which there was a profusion. He also constructed a rock walled tank into which the sotol-stalk smoke pipes led. In a surprisingly short time the contraption was ready to operate. The ore was placed on the stone grid, the fire lighted under it. Soon thick black smoke began to rise. And a little later, trickles of silvery metal flowed along the channels constructed to receive them.

"We've got it," Grant chuckled. "Now we'd better stake our claims and post our notices and get them ready for recording. I got some blanks in my pack.

"What shall we name the mine?" asked Kepnau, his pencil poised over the paper.

Grant chuckled again, and glanced at the smoking furnace.

"Red rock, black smoke, and white metal," he said. "A color for each of us. Reckon we'll just name her the 'Red, Black and White Mine.'

"But this is a crude method," he added a little later. "It's slow and there's an awful waste. What we need is some proper retorts, crushing machinery and lots of powder. But that will cost a lot of dinero, several thousand dollars. Reckon we'll just have to plug along till we get together enough money to take care of things proper."

"We'll get it," declared Mose Wagner, busily stoking the furnace. "Bring along some more ore, Kep."

A week later the partners decided it was time to head for town and replenish supplies. They were also anxious to properly record their claims.

"This sort of thing gets around 'fore you know it," said Grant. "Seems the buzzards and the coyotes relay the word even when there ain't nobody in sight. We don't want to have trouble with claim jumpers."

On the way to town, they paused to dig up the buried gold they had taken from the dead owlhoots. Upon arriving at Marton they first repaired to the sheriff's office. They found the grizzled old peace officer at his desk.

"Well, gents, what can I do for you?" he asked.

By way of answer, Jim Grant upended one of the saddle pouches and poured a flood of glittering double-eagles on the sheriff's desk.

"W-what in blazes?" sputtered the astounded lawman.

In terse sentences, Grant regaled him with an account of what happened at the waterhole. The sheriff swore vividly and pounded his desk with his fist.

"The Cowper bunch, sure as shootin'!" he declared. "Last month they wrecked the C & P flyer and robbed the express car. Got fifty thousand dollars in gold. This is it, all right. And you downed three of the sidewinders?"

"And plugged another one," said Wagner.

"A fine chore," applauded the sheriff, "a plumb fine chore. Remember what the hellions looked like?"

"Pretty ornery lookin' specimens," Grant replied. "The one who was goin' to plug me with the rifle had a big scar on his left cheek. Looked like the whole

side of his face had been caved in some time or other."

"Sime Callison, Cowper's side-kick," explained the sheriff. "Meaner than Cowper himself but without Cowper's brains. This is gettin' better. One of 'em didn't happen to be a big husky hellion with black whiskers?"

Grant shook his head. "Nope," he disclaimed. "They all needed a shave, but I don't figure any of 'em wore whiskers."

"Then Cougar Cowper and a half dozen more like him are still maverickin' around," the sheriff growled gloomily. "But just the same, this is fine. You fellers stay right here and keep an eye on this stuff while I do some telegraphin'. The express company folks will want to hear about this pronto. Set down and take it easy—bottle of likker in the top drawer—I'll be back in a jiffy."

The sheriff returned soon afterward, wearing a broad grin.

"The express company representative will be here on the evenin' train," he announced. "You fellers stick around town till he gets here. I 'low he's got somethin' interestin' to tell you."

The partners spent the rest of the day buying supplies and looking over the town. The general storekeeper was glad to purchase the quicksilver and promised to provide a market for all they brought in.

"And any time you fellers feel the need of a little credit, don't hesitate to ask," he told them. "Fellers who will bring in fifty thousand dollars they just as well could have hung onto can be trusted, I 'low."

The sheriff had spread the story around, and other prominent citizens stopped the partners to commend them on their exploit.

JIM GRANT had an uneasy feeling, however, that the downing of the three owlhoots and the recovery of the stolen gold would not meet with the universal approval that it should. Law and order were in the ascendancy in Marton, but there were other elements coming and going through the railroad town that were questionable as to antecedents and doubtful as to future actions. Grant knew the story would be widely spread and not all the notice it would attract would be favorable.

"Anyhow, we got a few extra hundred dollars in our pockets," he observed to Kepnau and Wagner. "Not near enough to buy the stuff we need for real production, but it helps. A few more trips and we should be in good shape. I filed the claims and everything is under control."

After the arrival of the evening train from the west, they returned to the sheriff's office to receive the congratulations of the express company representative. After shaking hands all around. and receipting for the recovered gold, he drew a slip of paper from his wallet and passed it to Grant. It was a check for five thousand dollars.

"The reward the company offered for the recovery of the stolen shipment," he explained. "Pity you didn't get Cougar Cowper while you were at it. There are several bank rewards out for him."

Grant stared wide-eyed at the check. "We wasn't thinking of reward money when we downed those hellions," he told the agent, "but just the same this will come in mighty handy right now. It will enable us to properly develop our claims."

"How's that?" asked the express man.

Grant briefly explained the mercury mine they were working and the need of adequate equipment.

"I can lend you a hand there," said the agent. "Just give me a list of what you need and I'll arrange for the material and expedite shipment. Within three days you should have everything you need delivered here, cash on delivery. I'll telegraph instructions right now."

"That's sure nice of you, suh," Grant replied gratefully. "We're plumb much obliged for everything."

"And my company is plumb much obliged to you fellers," the agent replied with a quick smile. "We never expected to see that gold again."

The agent was as good as his word. The needed materials arrived on schedule. The partners were exultant as they loaded the mules they had purchased for transportation purposes.

"Now we can really go places," said Grant. "Our method was slow and wasteful and besides it wasn't exactly safe. You can get a bad case of mercury poisoning from continued breathing of the fumes. With these retorts and furnace equipment that danger is eliminated."

"I've a notion we'll have some company in that canyon before long," Kepnau observed. "Folks are talking about the strike and the chances are somebody else will be staking a claim. Several gents told me they aim to ride down and give things a onceover."

Kepnau didn't know it, but already a couple of "gents" had ridden out of town, headed south, but not with the intention of staking a claim.

"Well," said Grant, when they arrived at the canyon with the long string of laden pack mules, "I reckon first off we might as well build ourselves a decent shack to live in. I've a notion we'll be stickin' around here for quite a spell."

Grant was right in his prediction, for they were the pioneers of an industry that was to flourish in the Terlingua Creek country for many years to come.

With the proper equipment, production speeded up greatly. Soon rows of flasks filled with the silvery liquid-metal stood in the newly finished cabin. The old furnace built of boulders and blood-cement stood black and fireless while the efficient retorts did the work formerly entrusted to it.

"Let her stand," Jim Grant said when Kepnau suggested that it be torn down and taken out of the way. "I got a kind feelin' for that old rock heap. After all, it did us a mighty good turn and gave us our start, and Mose put in a lot of hard work building it. Let her stand."

Which was a most momentous decision, as the partners were soon to realize.

DAY after day the canyon resounded to the rumble of dynamite blasts, the clicking of picks and the clang of shovels. And day after day, concealed in the growth of the long slope above the lofty canyon rim, vengeful watchers noted every move in the gorge below.

"We're holdin' off a while yet," Cougar Cowper told his impatient followers. "They're workin' for us. There's thousands of dollars' worth of quicksilver in that shack already, and more addin' to it every day. That will sort of make up for what the hellions made us lose from that express car haul. We'll make a good haul and even up scores at the same time. Take it easy. When I give the word we'll swoop down on 'em."

"Why not plug 'em from the canyon rim?" suggested a vindictive looking individual who could not raise his right arm shoulder high, thanks to Jim Grant's bullet. "That's safer than ridin' in on 'em. They're bad medicine."

"Uh-huh, that's what a terrapin-brained horned toad like you would think, Brady," the outlaw leader snorted derisively. "Did you ever try shootin' down at somethin' from up high? The chances for a miss are almighty good. Besides, that blasted Injun has eyes like a hawk and ears like a coyote. He'd be plumb liable to hear or spot us before we got into action, and shootin' above you is a easy chore. No brush on that rim, just naked rock. Nothin' to use for cover. You shet your trap and let me handle this. I let you jiggers handle that express job while I was down below the Line, and look what happened!"

Finally the last flask in the cabin was full of heavy, silvery metal.

"We got all the mules can pack," said Grant. "We'll spend the rest of the day tidying up and crushing the ore we got down—ain't but two or three hours till dark—and tomorrow mornin' early we'll head for town. There'll be money in the bank after this trip, fellers."

Grant and Kepnau busied themselves at the ore heap, which was up the canyon a way toward the cabin, which sat around a bend in the gorge. Mose was working farther down the canyon, close to the old furnace. An hour passed and Grant was thinking of calling a halt to cook supper.

It was Kepnau's abnormally keen hearing that saved them. As he straightened his back from shoveling, he caught a clicking sound down canyon. He listened a moment, then spoke to Grant.

"There's somebody coming," he said. "Come on, let's slide around to the cabin and get our guns. Chances are it's just somebody from town riding down to look things over, like they said they figured to do, but we might as well play safe."

"Right," agreed Grant, dropping his pick. They turned to go. Kepnau shot a glance down the gorge and spotted stealthly movement at the edge of the brush.

"Hightail!" he barked.

They ran across the clearing toward the bulge which hid the cabin. There was a blast of gunfire from the brush and lead hissed all around them. Duck-

ing and weaving, they raced for the shelter of the bulge. Behind them sounded yells and curses and the banging of guns. They swerved around the cliff and darted into the cabin, slamming the door behind them.

"Thunder and blazes!" Grant suddenly swore. "They've got Mose trapped. He couldn't make it. We've got to get him."

But even as he turned to the door, bullets thudded into the thick planks. Others smashed through the windows, shattering floors with broken glass.

"We can't get out," shouted Kepnau. "Stop 'em before they bust in!"

He grabbed a rifle and knelt beside the window. There were chinks between the logs of which the walls were built, the partners not having taken the time to stop them with mud during the warm weather. Kepnau peered through one, thrust his rifle barrel forward and fired as fast as he could pull trigger. A yell of pain and a storm of curses answered the shots. Grant also got into action. The owlhoots, who were rushing the cabin, gave back and darted out of sight behind the cliff bulge, two of them nursing painful wounds.

"Did you spot the big one with the whiskers?" Grant exclaimed to his companion. "It's the Cowper bunch, sure as shootin'. Poor old Mose! Reckon' he's a goner."

But Mose wasn't yet. When the shooting started, he was behind the old furnace cleaning a retort. Before he could straighten up or do anything, the thud of feet racing up the canyon told him he could never hope to make it to the cabin. He looked wildly around for shelter. His eyes fell on the dark stoke hole in the old furnace wall.

Mose went into that hole, and he didn't hesitate on the order of his going. It was a tight squeeze for his huge frame, but he made it. Lying at full length in the sooty darkness, he heard the boom of rifles answering the rattle of six-gun fire, heard the yells of pain and the cursing as the owlhoots gave back before the blast of the two long guns.

"The boys made it to the shack!" he exulted. "They can hold 'em off from there. But, oh, lawdy! lawdy! if them scuts saw me scoot in here, or come nosin' around. And I don't feel good enough to be wearin' wings just yet!"

But as the minutes passed, he became more assured. He wormed around in his cramped quarters under the stone grill and risked a glance out the stoke hole. He could see the owlhoot bunch grouped behind the bulge, talking and gesticulating. Words reached his straining ears.

"Wait till dark," he heard the whiskered Cowper rumbling. "Then we'll snuk up and burn 'em out. Brady, you squat where you can keep an eye on that shack door. No use wastin' lead on them logs. Wait till it gets dark."

In the cabin, Grant and Kepnau were not lulled into a sense of false security by the cessation of the owlhoots' fire.

"They're schemin' something," declared the cowboy. "Cougar Cowper don't give up this easy."

"You're right," Kepnau replied. "We're okay now, but it will be different after dark. I've a prime notion, Jim, that poor Mose will soon have company."

"We'll try and take a few of the sidewinders along with us, anyhow," Grant promised grimly.

In his dark and smelly hole, Wagner lay watching the activities of the outlaws.

"Lawdy! lawdy! If I just had a gun with me!" he mourned. "I'd sure make it hot for them devils. We'd get 'em between two fires and clean 'em up for fair. I got to do somethin' come dark. The boys won't have a chance. They'll fire the shack and shoot 'em down when they run out."

One of the owlhoots passed back down the canyon and returned shortly, leading horses. Mose counted six altogether.

"That's all of 'em over there by the cliff, then," he muttered. "Six agin' the three of us. That ain't good, and me without a shootin' iron. Now what they goin' to do?"

MOSE saw the owlhoots take provisions from their saddle-pouches. Then, leaving the man Brady to keep a close watch on the cabin door, they built a fire close to the cliff face and proceeded to prepare a meal. The shadows were curdling in the canyon's depths as they sat grouped around the fire, eating. And in his dark hide-out, Mose Wagner made a plan, a desperate and dangerous plan, but one he thought had a chance of succeeding.

On the other side of the furnace was a rock lined hole over which rested a

thick stone slab. It was their cache of dynamite, caps and fuse. As the dusk thickened, Wagner crawled cautiously from his refuge and slithered around the furnace. Careful not to make the slightest sound, he raised the stone slab and snatched out dynamite cartridges, caps and a coil of fuse.

Swiftly he crimped the caps into place, cutting the fuse dangerously short. He peered around the corner of the furnace, saw that the owlhoots were busy over their food. He scratched a match, shielding the tiny flame with his cupped hands, and touched it to the fuse. A spurt of golden sparks hissed forth.

Wagner straightened up, stepped around the corner and hurled the dynamite cartridge with all the strength of his big arm. It described a hissing curve and fell into the very heart of the fire, scattering sparks and embers in every direction.

"What the devil was that?" yelped Cowper, leaping to his feet.

He got his answer almost instantly. There was a thundering roar, a fluff of reddish light and the campfire flew in every direction. Through the swirl of smoke, Wagner saw the bewhiskered bandit and another man running wildly toward the bulge where the astounded Brady yelled and cursed in bewilderment. On the ground amid the smoking embers lay three mangled and motionless forms. Wagner touched a match to a second capped cartridge and threw it.

The three owlhoots saw it coming. With yells of terror they darted around the bulge and straight toward the cabin as the stick exploded.

Inside the cabin, Grant and Kepnau heard the boom of the first explosion and the yells of agony and fright. For an instant they were at a loss as to the meaning of the uproar. Then Jim Grant understood. He leaped to the barred door as the second explosion cut loose.

"They didn't get Mose!" he whooped. "He's out there chuckin' dynamite at them. Come on, Kep, we got to lend a hand."

They banged the door open and rushed out, to come face to face with Cowper and his two remaining companions. Instantly the canyon rocked to a bellow of gunfire.

One of the outlaws went down. Kepnau staggered as a slug creased his shoulder. His rifle boomed sullenly and a second man fell.

Jim Grant and Cowper, weaving and ducking, blasted at each other through the smoky dusk. Grant reeled sideways, blood streaming from a bullet gashed cheek. He steadied himself and fired as Cowper pressed trigger. He felt the wind of the outlaw's bullet, fired again. Cougar Cowper lurched backward as if hit by a mighty fist. For an instant he stood erect, stiff, motionless. Then he plunged forward on his face and lay without sound or movement.

Mose Wagner came running through the shadows, brandishing a glowing ember and a third dynamite stick.

"Hold it!" bawled Grant. "Nobody left but us."

"Lawdy! lawdy!" panted Wagner. "For a spell I was just about sure for certain there wasn't goin' to be any of us left!"

Grant stooped and turned the dead outlaw leader onto his back. He gazed down at his bearded face.

"Uh-huh, it's Cowper, all right," he said. "Looks like we're in for some more reward money. But," he added thoughtfully, "I don't reckon we'll take it. It's blood money, so far as we're concerned, and we don't need that sort. We're doin' all right as it is. I 'low a good notion would be to turn it over to the wife and kids of that young bank clerk the hellions killed over to Chisos last month. What you say?"

Wagner and Kepnau nodded emphatic agreement.

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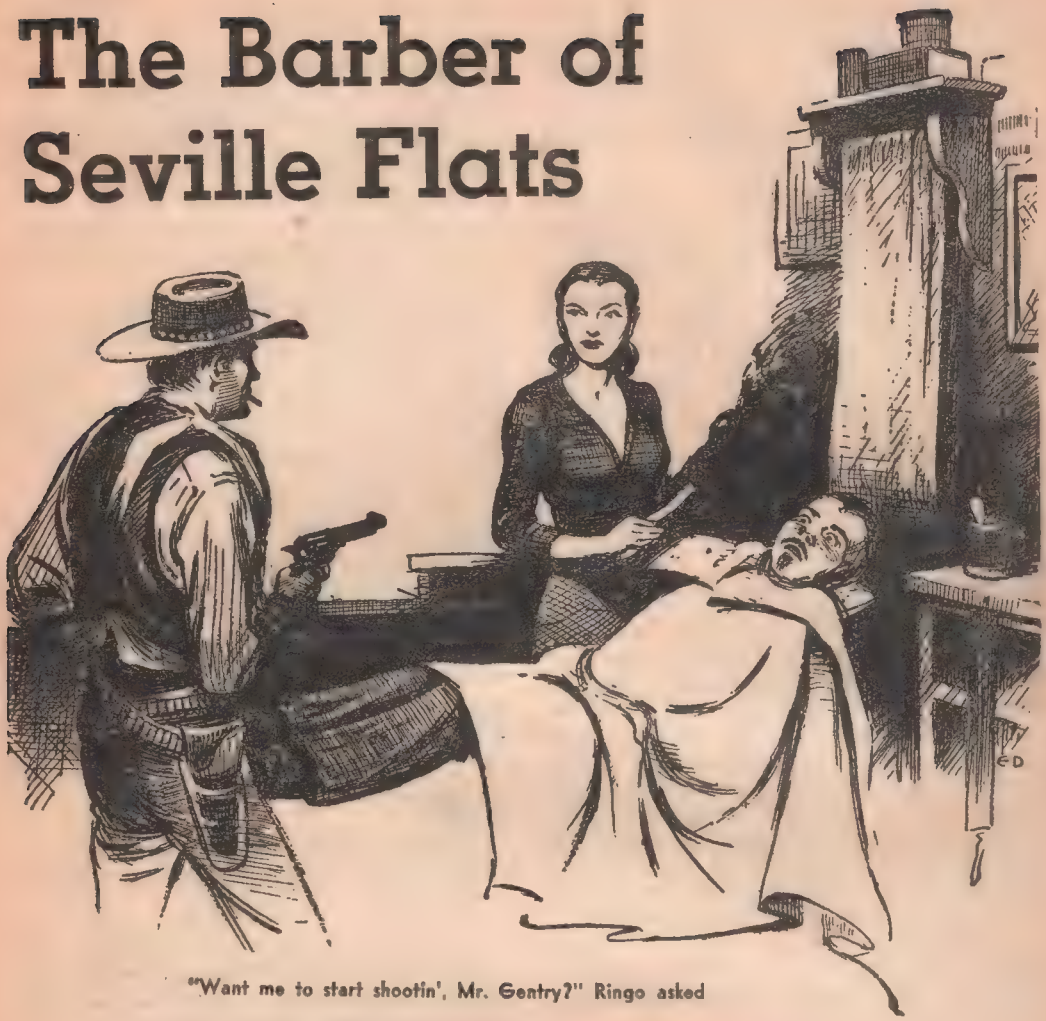
The Barber of Seville Flats



"Want me to start shootin', Mr. Gentry?" Ringo asked

By ROBERT J. HOGAN

THE whisky drummer looked skeptically at the barber.

"I don't know," he said. "I never had a woman barber work on me." He winked at Cal McDermott sitting with two other men on the waiting bench along the south wall of the shop.

Cal said, "You don't need to worry about Maggie."

Ash Freeling said, "She learned barbering from the best barber in the Territory. Her old man. Took over when his hand got too shaky."

Ed Townsend offered, "Maggie's got a shaving hand as smooth as the velvet collar on a gambler's coat."

"I was figuring on a hair-cut first," the whisky salesman said. "Can she cut hair without snipping off a man's nose?"

Maggie Moran waited beside the one barber chair in the place, waited with

Never Irritate a Lady Tonsorial Artist at Election Time!

disgust and a little anger rising in her dark eyes. Finally, she said, "You going to get into the chair, mister, or will the blacksmith have to tie you to his kicking stanchion?"

The men laughed and the drummer got into the chair. He said, "Does the customer get to be kissed by a lady barber?"

She shook the blue gingham apron out and spread it over him. "Sure," she said. "Every time I cut off an ear." She tucked the towel around inside the drummer's collar.

There was sound of new heeled boots beating the hollow boards of the walk out front and Black Gentry came in. Ringo, his lieutenant was right behind him, walking almost on his heels.

Gentry was a striking man, tall, well knit with a ruffled shirt sticking out of the front of his long, black jim-swinger coat like the white meat on the breast of a turkey. He took off his wide brimmed black hat and paused, glancing at the man in the chair.

The three men on the bench said, "Morning, Mr. Gentry," in a chorus like so many magpies that had learned to talk.

Gentry didn't take his eyes off the whisky drummer. He touched his pointed Van Dyke goatee and coughed.

Maggie had been working the shears with her back to the door so she could have the light from the front window on her work. Now she turned. "Morning, Mr. Gentry. I'll be through before long."

"I haven't time to wait," Gentry said. "I usually have my shave at this time in the morning." He kept glaring at the whisky drummer in the chair.

AT first the salesman looked annoyed. Then he turned his head. His face lighted. "Mr. Gentry," he said. "I was just getting trimmed up to look presentable when I call on you for your order."

"We can talk right here," Black Gentry said. "You can talk to me while I get my usual shave and you won't need to get shaved first."

"Glad to accommodate," the salesman said. "Mighty glad, Mr. Gentry." He pulled the apron down and got out of the chair.

Black Gentry slipped into the chair, loosened his collar. He began talking whisky business as Maggie tipped him back in the chair and drew the apron over him. The whisky drummer began taking down the order as Gentry gave it to him.

Ringo hunkered his big, loose frame at the end of the waiting bench and eased his six shooters so they rested on the bench and took the weight off his belt.

Ash Freeling said, "Who you figuring to run for sheriff against your cousin this time, Mr. Gentry."

"I haven't figured," Gentry said. He made a mirthless chuckling sound. "It wouldn't matter. I'll see that Clay wins."

Ed Townsend said, "You got to run somebody opposing Clay to make the election legal here in the county."

Maggie stopped shaving Black Gentry until he stopped nodding his head. He said, "I know that. You got anybody to suggest that wouldn't mind losing?"

"How about running Tug Kelso?" Maggie asked.

There was a tense hush in the place. Everybody was taken by surprise. Tug Kelso was a mild little man who had a mysterious past and a thirst that some said must have brought him down from wherever he once had been to cleaning and polishing the brass cuspidors at Black Gentry's Palace and generally making himself handy about the saloon and gambling house.

Black Gentry looked up into Maggie's big, bland face. "You serious, Maggie?"

"Sure I'm serious," she said. "Just getting the chance to run even when he mightn't win would maybe make Tug feel important. He might even quit his drinking and make something of himself."

She stopped shaving Gentry abruptly. The sound of his derisive laughter boiled up little angers against him that had been simmering inside her big soul for a long time.

Black Gentry had come to Seville Flats seven years ago and bought the

newly discovered Lost Mule Mine near town. He'd started mining on a big scale hiring over a hundred miners, then he'd bought the tumbled down Bucking Horse Saloon and done it over. He called it The Palace with gambling in the big back room that he had added. Folks said that with his crooked games he took away most of the money that he paid his miners for working.

There had been plenty of talk in the barber shop about Black Gentry and his rising power. He was so big now that there wasn't a man in the country dared face him if he didn't want to endanger his business.

But Maggie's distaste for the man went deeper than any dislike for the way he'd come to run the town. Her dislike for Gentry was more personal than that. It concerned itself with the way Black Gentry had played on Tug Kelso's weakness for drink and kept him swamping out the saloon, working for practically nothing.

NOW, Black Gentry's laughter had suddenly boiled Maggie's smoldering bitterness to the top. Gentry saw her hatred and ignored it. He said, "Who would sign a petition to run a drunken swamper?"

There was sudden stillness in the shop, then Maggie's full voice said, "I would. And there's a lot of other decent people in town who would, too, if they thought it'd mean breaking the strangle hold on this town that you've got, Mr. Gentry."

It was out. The underlying sense of frustration that the old residents of the county had stifled because they dared not speak against Gentry had suddenly spilled out of Maggie's mouth in one lump.

Black Gentry moved to leap out of the chair but she had the razor under his goatee and he didn't dare move. She went on shaving him calmly, while his face turned crimson and then purple. She said, "Hold still, Mr. Gentry, or I'm liable to cut you."

There was only the sound of the razor cutting tough hair, then Maggie said, "I'd like you to be the first to sign that petition, Mr. Gentry."

"I sign no petitions but my own."

She whisked the razor over the unshaved portion of his face.

"Maybe you're afraid Tug Kelso might have some ability that he's not showing," she said. "Maybe he wasn't always the bum that you've helped make him."

She wiped the lather off his face with a damp cloth and Black Gentry threw off the apron and got out of the chair.

"I don't take insults," he said," not even from women." He started for the door. Ringo got up off his haunches and followed along.

Gentry turned at the door. He barked, "If there was another barber shop within two hundred miles of this town I'd take my business there." He started then stopped again and flung more at her. "I think I'll bring a good barber to this town and open up a modern barber shop."

He stamped out and back toward The Palace.

"You sure got your nerve up, Maggie," Cal McDermott said. "You know that Black Gentry could put you out of business and run you out of town?"

"He might," Maggie said. "Nobody can ever tell what's in the future. But starting right now, I'm collecting names for a petition so Tug Kelso can run against Clay Boyd for sheriff."

Maggie trimmed and shaved the whisky drummer after that and then Ed Townsend got in the chair and she was cutting his hair when Lawyer Steele came in to buy a cigar.

She told the attorney what she had told Black Gentry and Steele brushed his wide mustache with the back of his hand and chuckled.

"I wish I could have been here and heard you giving it to him."

"I'll remember it the rest of my life," Ash Freeling said. "Makes a man a little ashamed to have a woman tell Gentry off when there isn't a man thinks anything of his property or business who'd have the sand to speak his mind to Gentry."

"You haven't got more than the three days before election to circulate the petition and get him on the ticket," Steele said.

"That'll be enough," Maggie said.

"You're bucking a stone wall," McDermott said. "Gentry'll ring in any number of miners he figures is necessary and swear for 'em."

To Steele she said, "You draw up that petition, will you, Mr. Steele? I'm closing up shop right after lunch time and getting to work on it personally." She looked about at the men in her shop. "And I'll expect you all to put your names on the petition when Mr. Steele gets it made out."

Lawyer Steel said, "I'll have it back to you by one-thirty, Maggie, and my name'll be on the top of the list."

By two o'clock Maggie had eight names on the petition to put Tug Kelso on the ballot. Some places like Ham Hamilton's at the general store, she had to argue hard. But he signed and his clerk signed too. She kept going all that afternoon and that evening until late. By the time she came back to the quarters back of her shop she had almost enough to enter Tug's name.

There weren't any of the signers that thought Tug might really be the best sheriff possible. They signed, for the most part, because Maggie pleaded with them to give Tug a chance. That there was hope the petition and the chance to run might make a man out of Tug. Everybody admitted that Tug wouldn't have a chance of winning.

An hour after business opened next morning, Maggie had enough signers on the petition to make Tug a candidate and she told Lawyer Steele so when he came in for his morning shave. She said, "You take care of it, won't you? You're on the election board."

"I sure will," Steele said settling into the chair and leaning back. "Maggie, I think that's the fastest any man ever got put on a ticket in this county. You got what it takes to do things, but—"

She stopped whipping up lather in Lawyer Steele's personal shaving mug. "But what?"

"Well, I wouldn't want you to be too disappointed if Tug Kelso doesn't win. Black Gentry's got a system worked out that will bring him votes any time he needs them."

"You mean bringing in his miners in a body toward evening of election day?"

Steele nodded.

MAGGIE slapped the lather on him. "I've heard about that, wondered how it works."

"All Gentry's got to do is bring in as many miners as he figures he needs. He can have an extra hundred or so out at the mine until Ringo, who watches at the polls for him, decides how close the election is, then he can ride the whole new bunch in at the last minute."

"How can he do that?"

"If he swears all his miners have been in the state for a year and in the county thirty days who can disprove him? There's no check made."

Maggie began shaving the attorney smooth and even and clean. She thought a lot while she was shaving him and as she finished, she said, "Mr. Steele, you're on the election board. Would you appoint me as a watcher for Tug's side?"

"I sure will," Steele said, "but it won't do you any good."

"Maybe not," Maggie said. She wiped the lather off with a damp cloth and dried his face. Mr. Steele went out and a moment later Black Gentry came swaggering in.

Ringo came shadowing him in and hunkered down at the bench end. Gentry got into the chair and stretched out. He said, "I wouldn't take a chance on you, Maggie, with the way things have turned, if Ringo wasn't watching. If she so much as nicks me, Ringo, shoot up the place." He looked at the big mirror in front of the chair.

Maggie didn't look at Gentry. She got down his personal shaving mug, the one with the gold edge and the roses twined around the middle, and she began mixing his lather.

"You must have enough names to run Tug Kelso the way you've been going around," Gentry said.

"I got enough," she said. "Tug's running. Incidentally, where is Tug? I haven't seen him since we talked yesterday."

"He's been pretty busy cleaning up around," Black Gentry said. There was a cunning gleam in his eyes.

She shaved the right side of his face without another word and wiped off the razor. She began working on the left side, said, "So you're keeping him busy—and you figure he'll be busy till after election so he can't rustle up votes?"

Gentry didn't answer directly. He said, "Hurry with this shave. I've got matters to attend to."

"So have I," she said and her razor slashed and ripped through his beard. Gentry squirmed and complained. He said, "I swear I'll put you out of business and get somebody to open a good barbership."

Ringo came over with both guns drawn. He said, "You want me to start shooting up the place, Mr. Gentry? That mirror'd make a mighty fine target first thing."

"Go right ahead," Maggie said. Her razor paused under Black Gentry's pet goatee. "You start shooting and I'll start slashing at your boss's beard. Fact is, I never liked it on him, no way. Makes him look like a stuck up fancy Dan."

"Ringo," Gentry barked. "Go back and sit down before she ruins me."

"But you said—"

"I didn't mean for you to shoot up the place while she's got a razor on me."

Ringo clumped back and hunkered down again, perplexed.

Maggie said. "While you're in this fix, Mr. Gentry, it might be a good idea to tell me where Tug is at."

"No!" Gentry said. "I won't tell you."

"You got him drinking again, didn't you?" she said. "You got him started, figuring he won't sober up for a week and by then the election'll be over and he won't even know he ever ran, isn't that right, Mr. Gentry."

She nicked at his clipped beard and he squirmed, then she moved the razor down lower. "Maybe if I was to start cutting off that goatee a couple of inches lower it'd come off slicker with some hide."

"Maggie!" Gentry yelled. "You'll cut my throat!"

"Then start talking," Maggie said.

Big, dumb Ringo came near again. He said, "You want me to start shooting, Mr. Gentry?"

"No!" Gentry choked. "Get away from her. Leave her alone. Get out of here. All right, Maggie. He's in Room Three over the saloon."

"Sleeping off his first drunk, is he?" she said. "You just got him good and started, have you?"

SHE removed the razor, caught hold of Gentry's goatee and yanked him up in the chair.

"Now you get out of here!"

Gentry threw off the towel. He drew back his hand and slapped Maggie hard across the face. "I'll have you put out of business," he roared. "I'll run you out of town."

"Not with the next lawman on our side you won't," she said.

Gentry grabbed his hat and got out still threatening.

Maggie got her late father's old double barreled shotgun and followed him. She kept the two barrels trained on Gentry and Ringo as they strode ahead toward The Palace. She was right behind them as they pushed through the batwing doors.

"Now!" Maggie roared. "One false move behind my back and I'll shoot up this place. This double barreled blunderbus will do a real job if I once start."

The customers, the two bartenders, the boss and his lieutenant were very still as Maggie mounted the stairs to the rooms over the saloon. She went down the hall to room number three and there she found Tug sleeping soundly with the aroma of alcohol thick about him.

Maggie emptied the water pitcher from the washstand over him and he splashed his way out of his slumber fast. She got him out, and up to the quarters behind her little shop.

She said, "I don't blame you, Tug. I know it's a weakness, like some folks

catch cold easier than others." She told him about his candidacy for sheriff and she put him to bed. "So folks won't talk, I'll stay nights with Lawyer Steele's wife until we get election over, one way or another."

Even from his fog shrouded depth, sad little Tug Kelso could see the futility before them. He said, "But, Maggie, we haven't got a chance of beating Black Gentry. He's got a system for bringing in all the votes he ever needs."

"Maybe," she said. "Now you get yourself in shape and later we'll start electioneering. Meantime, you can be thinking about your acceptance speech."

"But, Maggie, Black Gentry'll run in a flock of new miners and swear they've been with him long enough to vote."

"I know all that," she said. She paused to study him a long moment. "Tug, if you got to be sheriff, could you go back to being the man you used to be down west of the Pecos before that Vespers gang framed you and got you disbarred as a lawyer?"

Tug straightened and his chest came out. "Try me," he said. "Just try me." He frowned. "Say, how did you know about that Pecos business?"

"I never went steady with a man I didn't know considerable about," she said. "I had you looked up, Tug."

She went out then and closed his door.

Tug Kelso came around in pretty good shape late that afternoon. He put on the new suit of clothes she'd bought for him and they started through town talking to voters. They kept on right up to the morning the polls opened and by then, there was Maggie as a watcher for Candidate Tugwell Kelso, with her dad's old double-barreled shotgun, loaded, and ready to blast anyone without the right to vote.

Big, ape-like Ringo was watcher for Clay Boyd and his side. He'd apparently been sent to cause what trouble he could but Maggie and her shotgun kept him in line when he tried to raise questions about some of the old citizens in town.

The voting went on leisurely during the morning and on into the afternoon and as far as Maggie could tell, most of the votes had gone for Tug Kelso.

Late in the afternoon miners began arriving to vote and Maggie passed those that she knew. Time ran out until it was an hour before poll closing time, then she saw the long line of mine wagons turn into Main Street, heard the singing and yelling of the men riding in the wagons.

Up to now it seemed to Maggie, as well as she could judge, that Tug would win but now at sight of the wagons loaded with men, Ringo began laughing at her, saying, "Here goes your boy friend's chances for sheriff. Here comes Black Gentry and the votes he's been holding out."

Maggie said, "I certainly never expected this," and tried to look sad. "You go out and meet them, Ringo, and bring them up one at a time."

RINGO strode out laughing. He waved his long arms, shouted, "Swing right up in front and let the boys get in line to vote."

Maggie stood in the doorway with her shotgun held ready. She cocked the hammers of both barrels and waited.

Black Gentry got down out of the first wagon and came up with his first batch of miners from the wagon train. He said, "Maggie, these are my men. They've been in the state over a year and in the county over thirty days. I'll swear for them."

"Which one?" Maggie asked, blocking the doorway.

"All of them."

"Bring 'em up one at a time. We'll see." She nodded to a tall, gaunt miner with an old derby hat on. "You come up here and turn around so I can get a good look at you."

"What's the meaning of this?" Gentry snapped. "What are you trying to get away with, Maggie?"

"You get no ringers past me, Gentry. What's more, the new sheriff will be apt to arrest you for trying to stuff ballot boxes after this thing is over."

Gentry raised his voice. "Sheriff Boyd! Clay Boyd!"

The other candidate came running.

He was a tall, rather handsome young man with a weak mouth and meek eyes. "What's wrong, Mr. Gentry?" He laid his hands on his guns.

"Arrest that woman for impeding the voting," Gentry roared.

Maggie let go one barrel of her gun over their heads. Clay Boyd ducked, stood trembling. Then he slowly raised his hands over his head.

Maggie said, "Now you heel-traipsing sheriff, get back out of bounds of this voting place and stay there." She turned to Gentry. "Take that gaunt new miner you just brought and let me have a look at the next one you're trying to pass."

The next was a stocky little Irish looking man with a peaked hat and a snub nose and reddish hair. Maggie shook her head.

"You're not voting either," she said. "Get out of here. Next?"

GENTRY didn't seem to find adequate words. He fussed and fumed and swore and his men kept coming up and being sent off.

"Next?" Maggie kept calling as if she was turning them out of her barbershop and calling for the next customer.

And each man she allowed up, she made turn about and then she would send him away.

"You got no right," Gentry yelled. "What good does it do to turn 'em around? What can you tell that way?"

"I can tell if I like their last haircuts," Maggie said.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Like you said yourself, Mr. Gentry. If there was another barbershop within two hundred miles of Seville Flats, you'd go there. But there isn't, so you have to come to me or shave yourself."

"That's got nothing to do with it?"

"The deuce it hasn't," Maggie said. "If a miner's been in the county thirty days or more he's had his hair cut by me or it's grown long enough to hang down over his ears. These miners you're bringing have all had haircuts in the last week or so and I didn't do it and I got a suspicion that none of them would travel two hundred miles away to keep from having me cut his hair."

Beads of sweat stood out on Black Gentry's face. He argued about the next miner and the next and Maggie turned them all down, warned the crowd that was standing in a menacing pack fifty feet off that they stood to get arrested and locked up for trying to vote when they had no right.

The time for closing the polls came while they were still arguing and Lawyer Steele came to officiate at the counting of the ballots.

They ran over the count twice to make sure and Tug Kelso came out the winner by a small margin.

Lawyer Steele, being the local judge, swore Tug Kelso in right there before the voting place with half the town watching and when he was through, the new sheriff made a most commendable speech as their new lawman.

There wasn't any doubt in any mind that Tug knew just where to start looking when he said he was going to clean up the crooked gambling in Seville Flats. The citizens cheered Sheriff Kelso when he finished talking, then he held up one hand for quiet again.

"Just one more thing I want to say. What has happened today I owe to my friend and future wife, if she'll have me, Maggie Moran."

There was more applause and Tug Kelso went on.

"I'm going to need the help of every loyal citizen during the years of my office as sheriff. But I'm going to need Maggie's help more than that of anyone else." He turned to Maggie who, still carrying her two-barreled shotgun, had been standing back of Tug.

She came up smiling and Tug turned to her gravely. "Margaret Moran," he said, "raise your right hand."

She sobered, shifted the shot gun, raised her right hand.

"Do you swear to uphold the office of deputy sheriff of Seville County?"

"I do," she said.

Then, Sheriff Tugwell Kelso did kind of a sweet thing and the move was full of gratitude and respect. Right there before everyone, he kissed her.

"He's a lot of man," Dan Randolph said

SUMMER RANGE

By PHILIP KETCHUM

Chan Gabrian was only eighteen, but he could handle a herd of cattle—or a passel of schemers—like a man!

THE day after they reached the mountain valley which they had leased from the government for a summer range, Matt Burnhoff called his nephew, Chan Gabrian, aside.

"Do you think you could handle the herd this summer, on your own?" he asked bluntly.

Chan Gabrian had just turned eighteen. During the two years he had been riding for his uncle he had been holding down a man's job, but he had never

had an opportunity for anything like this, a chance to show what he could do. He nodded confidently.

"You shouldn't have much trouble," said Burnhoff. "This valley's enclosed on three sides. The opening's fenced. There's plenty of water and grass. After the critters have quieted down from the drive they'll just eat and grow fat. If anything goes wrong, Randolph's summer camp isn't more than ten miles away. There'll be several men there who could help you."

"I'll manage," said Chan.

"I'll leave the Lomax boys here for a few days, until you get settled," Burnhoff added. "Say for a week."

Chan frowned at that. He didn't particularly care for Sid and "Curly" Lomax. They were dour, silent, unfriendly fellows, at least a dozen years older than he was. But they had cattle savvy. They were good riders. There was no legitimate reason to object to Burnhoff's decision to have them stay here for a while.

"I'll ride back in about a month and see how you're making out," said Burnhoff. "Don't go to sleep on the job, Chan. This beef is the pick of my herd."

"I'll nurse 'em like they were babies," Chan promised with a wide grin.

He was feeling pretty good. He was a tall young man and thin, with an angular, freckled face and a crop of sandy hair. His body hadn't yet filled out but cordlike muscles ran up and down his frame. He had a little cattle savvy, himself, could handle a rope with any man who worked for his uncle, and even Matt Burnhoff, himself, wasn't any better than Chan with a six-gun. He had still to see a horse he couldn't ride. He had been born and reared east of the Mississippi, but the West had transformed him completely.

MATT BURNHOFF and those who had come on the drive with him, except Chan and the Lomax brothers, pulled out early the next morning, and for several days Chan was kept fairly busy. There were water holes to be cleared out. The fence had to be strengthened at several points. And the herd was still restless and might easily have been stampeded into the hills or against the fence. In the days to come there was work to be done on the cabin, particularly its roof, but that work Chan let ride.

He had little help from either Sid or Curly Lomax. They slept late and hung around the cabin most of the day. They discussed a hunting trip into the mountains. Chan had a notion that if he made an issue of it he could get some work out of them, but it was more pleasant working alone. When they finally told him they were going to try their luck at hunting, he offered no objections.

Chan liked this mountain country. He liked the clear, fresh air of the early morning, the mild heat of the day and the cool breeze that always came up at night. There was plenty of work to be done to keep him mildly busy for a long time. He anticipated no trouble and he realized that if he was successful in handling the herd this summer it ought to prove at least a little something to Matt Burnhoff.

Four days after the Lomax brothers left on their hunting trip, they returned. It was late afternoon when they rode into the valley. They brought no skins as evidence of their prowess with their rifles and were silent and unfriendly during the evening meal which Chan had prepared.

Both were short, stocky, bearded men. Sid, the older, was beginning to get bald, and his beard showed streaks of gray. He was heavier than Curly and walked with a slight limp. Curly was the more spirited of the two and was a man of quick and sudden anger.

Chan felt uneasy that evening when he went to bed. He knew his uneasiness was connected directly with the Lomax brothers but he could put his finger on no real reason for it. He was tired and as he dropped off to sleep, vaguely aware of their restless movements as they turned in their bunks, he consoled himself with the thought that they would soon be leaving for the home ranch.

What sound actually woke him, he

didn't know, and he had no idea what time it was, but he was suddenly wide awake and lying rigid in his bunk. A gray light filtered in through the cabin's windows. In it, he could see one of the Lomax brothers sitting on the edge of his bunk. Sid, he thought, but wasn't sure. The man seemed to be working with something he held in his lap. After a moment he gave a grunt of satisfaction and stood up.

"Get it fixed?" whispered a voice.

"Yep," came the hushed answer. "Shut up."

An icy chill raced up and down Chan's back. He still lay motionless, scarcely breathing, frightened but not sure why.

Sid Lomax stood up. He came across the room, straight toward Chan, and every muscle in Chan's body grew rigid. The man stopped at the edge of Chan's bunk, reached above it, then drew back. He looked down at Chan and for one terrible moment Chan's heart seemed to stop beating. Then, still carefully silent, the man turned and walked back across the room and slid between his blankets.

Chan's entire body was bathed in perspiration. His breath was coming hard, and he fought to control it. He still lay motionless and after a time was able to relax, but not so completely that there was anything restful about lying there in his bunk. He wanted to get up and get out of the cabin. He wanted to run. He had never felt like that before. Never in his life.

Gradually, his mind began working on a more normal basis. Sid Lomax had been working on something in his lap. He had come to his feet, had come over to this bunk and had reached to the wall above it. Chan's gun-belt and holstered gun hung there from a peg in the wall. There was nothing else. There was only one thing to figure. Sid Lomax had had his gun and had done something to it.

After a while the gray light sifting in through the windows grew lighter, announcing the approach of dawn. Both Lomax brothers were asleep, had been asleep for a long time. Chan got up quietly, drew on his trousers and boots and took down his gun-belt. He fastened it around his waist, moved to the door, took down his coat, carefully opened the door and stepped outside. Neither of the two bearded men had moved.

Chan Gabrian closed the door and hurried away from the cabin. He saddled his horse and struck off across the valley. Only then did he risk examining his gun.

It was loaded. He shook the bullets into his hand and looked at each one. They didn't seem to have been tampered with. He tested the gun's action. It worked. Across the valley and deep in one of the blind draws, Chan pointed the gun to the ground and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. There was no explosion. He tried this again and again. He tried it with fresh shells, then made a closer examination of the gun's mechanism. The firing pin had been filed down until it was almost flat.

Chan put the useless gun back in its holster. He sat there for a moment on his horse, not wanting to believe what he had to believe. Either of the Lomax boys could have started a row with him this morning, could have drawn on him, and when he went for his gun he would have died. It was of no more use than a toy but he wasn't supposed to know that. He had a rifle in the cabin, but his rifle had probably also been ruined.

What they planned, why they had done this, Chan didn't know. He had had no trouble with them, ever. But he faced trouble. That, he could be sure of.

IT was ten miles across the hills to the Randolph's summer range. Chan made it before sun-up. He had been here twice the year before. The Randolph's summer range was in a wider valley than his uncle's, and one not so well protected by the hills. Customarily, several men were left here with Randolph's herd, but this morning there were more. Dan Randolph, and the crew which had driven the cattle here, still hadn't left.

Dan Randolph was a big, broad-shouldered fellow, with a wide and friendly grin. He was standing at the chuck-fire

outside the cabin and as Chan rode up, he waved in greeting.

"Step down and eat," he suggested. "You're just in time."

This was an invitation Chan was glad to accept. He hadn't relished the thought of having to eat with the Lomax brothers.

"Your uncle told me a short time back that he might leave you in charge of the herd this summer," Randolph mentioned.

"He did," said Chan. "There are two other fellows with me for a while but they're about due to leave."

"How are things over the hills?"

"Just fine," Chan answered, "but I need the loan of a gun."

"The loan of a gun?"

Chan nodded. "The firing pin on mine, broke. It's an old gun, anyhow. Have you an extra one I could borrow?"

"Sure," said Randolph. "But let's see that gun of yours. Maybe I could fix it."

Chan frowned, but handed over his gun. He felt quite relieved when Randolph, after a brief examination, only shrugged and handed it back to him.

"It looks completely worn down to me," said the older man. "I've got an extra gun in my saddlebags you can have. I'll get it for you."

The gun Randolph brought him was a little heavier than the one Chan was used to, but it was like the old gun with which he had first practiced. And it worked. Chan tested it on the way back across the hills, tested it to feel its balance and recoil, tested it with a grimness which had never before been a part of his practice with a gun.

At the edge of the valley which was the Burnhoff summer range, Chan Gabrian reined up. He could see the cabin from here. White smoke lifted from the chimney into the clear, morning air, painting its way against the green background of the pine-covered hills. The Lomax brothers were apparently awake and had probably had breakfast. Maybe they were watching for him, wondering what had happened to him. Maybe they were even a little worried.

Chan pulled in a long, slow breath. He wondered what would happen when he rode up to the cabin. He wondered if anything would happen. This was a new experience he was facing. He had no pattern to follow. He felt a little shaky inside, unsure of himself. He wondered, now, if it wouldn't have been wiser to have told Randolph what had happened to his gun. Perhaps he should even have brought Randolph back here with him instead of feeling he had to handle whatever he was about to face on his own.

All these regrets and all this uncertainty came to his mind and then was banished. He touched the borrowed gun in his holster, loosening it. He lifted the reins.

"Come on, boy," he said to his horse. "Let's ride on in and see what happens."

His voice was a little sharp, a little harder than usual, but Chan didn't realize that. He angled across the meadow toward the cabin.

No one came to the door as he rode up. No face showed at the window. Chan dismounted, trailed the reins of his horse, and moved up to the door. He opened it and stepped inside. The Lomax brothers were still sitting at the table, finishing their coffee. They looked up as Chan came in. Both were scowling.

"Where did you go so early?" asked Sid, gruffly.

"Just out to check things," Chan replied. "That fence isn't so strong on the north end. Then I took a look up one of those north ravines. There's a place you can climb out."

Sid's eyes had narrowed. He pushed back his chair, wiped his hand across his mouth, glanced at his brother and then looked once more at Chan.

"It took you a long time," he mumbled.

Chan shrugged. He crossed to the side window, looked through it, and casually turned and leaned against the wall at the foot of one of the bunks. He watched Curly Lomax get up and walk to the front door. Lomax turned when he reached it, and Chan realized, abruptly, that he was boxed. One was on each side of him. He could claw for

his gun but he could get only one man. The other would get him.

"About those cattle," said Sid Lomax. "We sold 'em, Gabrian."

"You what!" Chan gasped.

"We sold 'em. We didn't go on any hunting trip. We rode over the mountains to Tiburon. We found a fellow who needed some beef. We sold him the herd. He'll be here to get 'em, today."

Chan moistened his lips. "No."

"That's the way it's going to be, Gabrian."

"No."

"How will you stop us?"

Sid Lomax had dropped his hand to his holstered gun. He was leaning forward in his chair. Chan could sense the tension in the man's body. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Curly at the door. Curly's hand was also on his gun.

"I took a longer ride this morning than I mentioned," said Chan quietly. "I rode over to Randolph's. I borrowed a gun. One that works. I'm wearing it. I'm faster than either of you, Sid—Curly. This isn't going to work out as you figured. One of you—dies."

A moment of silence followed. Chan could see the shock of this hit Sid Lomax. The man's eyes grew wider. Fear showed in them, and in his quickened breathing, and in the perspiration which broke out on his forehead. At the door, Curly was now in a half crouch, his fingers inches from his gun. Curly was probably as surprised as his brother.

"You asked how I'd stop you," said Chan, and his voice had hardened. "Well, I don't know, but I'll stop you—I think. Reach for your guns, and reach fast. Here I go. Now!"

HIS hand dropped to his holstered gun, flipped it out. He had been looking at Sid, who was closer than Curly. Sid, he figured, might hurry his shot more than Curly. And Sid's position was more awkward. There was more chance he might miss, even though he was closer.

Chan fired across his body at the figure at the door. Curly's hand had closed on his gun, jerked it free of its holster. He had been lifting it when Chan's bullet smashed into his skull. He had been leaning forward and now he pitched to the floor.

Chan Gabrian didn't see that. After firing at Curly he had whipped his gun toward Sid Lomax. He heard the roar of a shot, a shot from Sid's gun. Pain ripped through his shoulder, jarring him backwards. He fired and missed and saw Sid Lomax dive from his chair to the floor, twisting sideways as he fell, lifting his gun for another shot.

He reminded Chan, for some reason, of a huge and ugly frog which had to be destroyed. Leaning against the wall, Chan fired down at the man. He fired again and again and finally lowered his gun and stared bleakly down at Sid Lomax. The man wasn't moving, now. He was through moving, forever.

Chan reloaded and holstered his gun, hardly aware of what he was doing. The throbbing pain in his arm made him dizzy. His stomach was churning. He turned and leaned face against the wall, strugging against the sickness which tried to come up through his throat.

After a moment he moved unsteadily to the edge of the nearest bunk and sat down. He glanced from one Lomax brother to the other. They were dead, both of them. He had killed two men, and he didn't feel good about it, in spite of what they had done and what they had tried to do to him.

Warm blood was running down his arm. Chan managed to get his shirt off. He looked at the wound. It wasn't nearly so bad as he had expected it would be. It didn't look as bad as it felt. The thing to do was get it bandaged. Men were on their way here, the men to whom the Lomax brothers had sold the cattle. Chan had to be ready to face them and explain that a mistake had been made.

Five men rode into the valley about two hours before noon. They came in by the gate at the lower end and on the way across the meadow toward the cabin, stopped several times to inspect the cattle they passed.

Chan Gabrian waited in front of the cabin. He was pale and when he stood up his legs were wobbly. He had bandaged his arm as well as he could but the wound still sent continual pains stabbing through his body. Maybe it would heal. He didn't know. He was trying not to think about it.

The five riders finally headed straight for the cabin and pulled up near it and dismounted. One stayed with the horses. The other four approached Chan, who stood up and leaned back against the cabin's wall. He was wearing his coat to hide his bandaged arm. He didn't quite know what to expect of these men, but he hadn't wanted to look crippled.

"Nice herd of cattle," said one of the four men. "I was afraid, maybe, that I was being cheated but it looks as though I bought a bargain."

The man doing the talking was maybe forty years old. He was tall, slender, a little stooped. He wore a black mustache and was deeply tanned. Two guns were strapped at his sides. Chan noticed that, particularly. He noticed that and the sharp, watchful look in the eyes of the man's companions. The friendliness he might have expected as natural between men, was lacking. There could be only one reason for this.

These men hadn't been fooled by the Lomax brothers. They had known what kind of deal they were making. They would back it up with their guns.

"These cattle," said Chan slowly, "belong to Matt Burnoff. They're on summer range."

The tall, stooped man was scowling. "They belong to me. I bought 'em. Where's Sid Lomax?"

"Sid Lomax didn't own these cattle. He worked for Burnhoff."

"Where's Lomax?"

"I'll get him out here," said Chan slowly, "but it won't do you any good, mister."

He turned to the cabin, stepped inside, slammed the door and then moved swiftly to the open window.

"Fork your horses an' ride," he shouted. "Those cattle—"

A BULLET smashed into the room, tugging at the sleeve of his coat as it passed him. There was another shot, then several more. Chan turned back to the door and dropped the bar-bolt into place. He edged over to the window again.

The man who had been holding the horses was leading them toward the blind side of the cabin. Chan took a shot at him, aiming at his legs. The man screamed. He dropped the reins he had been holding, twisted half around, and sprawled to the ground. He lay there motionless while the horses danced away.

A shot streaked at Chan Gabrian through the side window. He crouched to the floor. Lead ripped through the door. A man outside crashed against it, but the door didn't give.

"Wait a minute!" someone shouted. "Let's talk to him."

The firing stopped. Chan stayed where he was. He didn't risk a look through the window.

"Hey, you in the cabin," bawled a voice. "What do you want?"

Chan made no answer.

"Didn't you get your cut?"

Still Chan said nothing. The man outside doing the talking, sounded close to the front door. Where the others were, Chan didn't know. One probably covered each window. The fellow who had been holding the horses and whom he had shot, by this time would have crawled out of sight on the side of the cabin where there wasn't a window.

"Listen, kid," said the voice near the door. "You don't have a chance against us and you know it. Maybe you can stand us off for a while, but what'll you do when it gets dark. Use your head, kid. Which would you rather have, a pocket full of money or a skin full of shot."

Chan edged close to the door. He leveled his gun in what he thought was the direction of the man's voice. He squeezed the trigger.

Answering shots blasted into the cabin, but after a moment the firing stopped. Again Chan crouched close to the floor. The men outside, he decided,

were probably talking things over. But they would be watching the cabin, watching for a chance to get him.

Maybe they would wait until dark, as the man outside had threatened. He wouldn't have much chance after dark. In fact he couldn't have a chance at all. They could burn him out after dark with no danger to themselves. The smoke of a fire might be seen by day, but by night would be hidden.

They had to get him. They couldn't just drive the cattle off and leave him to summon help. This had been planned as a clever steal. If this herd of cattle disappeared and no one was left to report it, the loss might not be discovered for weeks.

"Hey, you in the cabin," called a voice. "We'll give you an hour to think things over. An hour—then we're coming after you."

An hour to think things over. Chan's lips tightened. An hour or the rest of the afternoon—what difference did it make?

Chan reached for the gun Curly Lomax had dropped. He tucked it in his belt. He crawled to where the body of Sid Lomax had fallen and got Sid's gun.

An hour to think things over. Chan shook his head. He moved once more to the front of the cabin. He stood up and pulled the body of Curly Lomax erect with him, then reaching out, unbarred the front door and pulled it open.

"Hey," someone shouted in warning. "He's coming out."

Chan released his hold on the body of Curly Lomax, giving it a slight push so it fell across the open door, fell and lay there motionless.

"It looks like we got him, Wes," said a voice near the cabin.

"Watch it, Joe," came the answer. "He may be fooling."

"I'll watch it," grumbled the first man.

Chan Gabrian stood back against the wall near the window, partly protected by the door, a gun in each hand. He waited there, silent, every muscle rigid. He would have no chance against these men if he waited till dark. It didn't seem likely that he'd have much chance this way, but it was the best, the only break, he had been able to figure.

FOOTSTEPS approached the cabin. A man came in, gun leveled, ready for instant use. He stepped across the figure on the floor, turned and stared down at it. Another man followed him. A third. Outside at the door there was another. Chan made no sound. Someone bent over the figure on the floor, bent over and then suddenly straightened with a gasp.

"Say, this man's got a beard. This is—"

"Stand where you are," Chan grated. "Stand and reach."

They whirled toward him. They didn't stand and reach. They whirled toward him, their guns blasting in hurried shots. They whirled into the spitting flames of the two guns Chan Gabrian held. One man reeled backwards, twisted sideways, and fell against another. One clutched at his stomach and seemed to dive forward. A third was on his knees, screaming at Chan, screaming and pumping lead from his gun.

The wall prevented Chan Gabrian from pitching over but it couldn't keep his feet under him. He slid down it, a film gathering over his eyes. There was no strength left in his wounded arm and not enough in the other one. He tried to bring up his gun, tried to level it at the fellow who was kneeling, but the effort was too much. Now, he couldn't even see the man. The room had grown dark, so dark he couldn't see across it, so dark he couldn't see anything. He twisted over on his side as he toppled to the floor. . . .

A voice reached through the darkness which held him. It was Dan Randolph's voice, sharp, commanding. "Lie still, Chan. Quit fighting us. This bullet's got to come out. Lie still, I tell you."

Then, and it must have been days later, Chan's head cleared and he knew he was lying on a cot in a tent, and he sensed that a lot of men were around him. He heard Randolph's voice again,

(Concluded on page 120)

The

Tantor and his men returned the fire, but those in the cabin were too well protected

BOOTHILL BUSTER

The bitterness of the bloody past would be forgotten in a brighter future, Jim Tantor hoped, as side by side with his girl he fought to tame the gun-wolves of Chugwater Basin!

an Action Novelet by GUNNISON STEELE

CHAPTER I

War!

WHEN Sheriff Tolan saw the lean, golden-haired young giant ride into town and head his powerful steel-dust gelding toward the sheriff's office, he sighed and reached for the whisky bottle on the desk before him.

He knew Jim Tantor, and guessed what had brought him into town this early in the morning. And he knew that Jim Tantor was one hombre it wasn't safe to fool with when he was on the prod.

The whisky made a gurgling noise as it slid down Sheriff Tolan's fat throat. He was a mountain of flesh, bald, with mean black little eyes that were almost hidden between folds of fat.

Sheriff Tolan, like a good many other things in Chugwater Basin, belonged body and soul to Ike Breen. Ike Breen, who, profiting by the bewilderment of a land yet rocking from the red turmoil of civil war, was building with gunsmoke and savage ruthlessness an outlaw empire here in this fertile valley.

Tolan set the bottle back on the desk as Jim Tantor came into the office. He saw the grim set of Tantor's lean, sunbronzed face, the harsh anger in his tawny eyes. He did not miss the two black guns, tied low on Tantor's lithe, narrow hips.

"Well," the sheriff wheezed, "what can I do for you, young feller?"

JIM TANTOR'S silver spurs jangled as he strode across the room and planted himself spread-legged across the desk from the fat lawman. There was contempt in his eyes as he looked at Tolan.

"Sheriff," Tantor said slowly, "last night rustlers stole a hundred head of cattle from me. What do you aim to do about it?"

Tolan faked amazement. "A hundred head? That's a lot of cows for a little gent like you. About cleans you out, don't it?"

"They took the last cow I had. I was holding them over on my west range, aiming to drive them to market in a few days. A couple of my boys was keeping them herded. A few hours ago a gang jumped the herd, gunned my riders from their saddles without giving them a chance. Killed Johnny Flint, and rode off with the herd, leaving Buck Redman for dead."

Sheriff Tolan made a clucking noise with his tongue and reached for the whisky bottle.

"That's too bad," he said. "I'll see

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what I can do about it. I'll round up a posse and trail them skunks and try to get your cows back. Now, which way did them gents go?"

"North," said Jim Tantor grimly. "Ike Breen stole them cows, sheriff—if it'll help you any to know!"

Sheriff Tolan's start looked almost real. He looked cautiously about, and lowered his voice.

"Now, wait a minute, feller! I wouldn't go about saying such things, if I was you, unless I had proof. You got any proof to back your charge?"

Jim Tantor's lips curled contemptuously. "I don't need proof, any more than I need proof to know Breen's the lousy skunk that's been stealing other cattle from me, cutting my fences, poisoning my waterholes! Breen's been wanting my little Wineglass outfit for a good while. But he ain't got me licked, not yet! The question is, do you aim to get my cattle back?"

"Didn't I say I'd see what I could do?" Tolan demanded. "But don't expect too much. You've got to remember that this is wild, rough country. There ain't much law here. When I'm in one spot, owl-hooters always seem to know it and start raising hell some other place."

"I'd noticed that," Jim Tantor grunted.

Briefly, the good-humored mask slipped from Sheriff Tolan's fat, greasy face. His vicious soul was mirrored in his flesh-buried little eyes.

"You notice too much," he growled. "If I was you, laddie, I'd ride on back to my two-bit spread. Then I'd pack my other pair of levis, top my bronc and fog outa this valley as fast as hell would let me!"

Jim Tantor laughed, a flat, harsh sound. He placed his strong hands on the desk and leaned toward Tolan, and the crooked lawman drew backward a little from the icy fury in his gold-flecked eyes.

"I don't want your advice," Tantor said slowly, deliberately. "I didn't come here thinking you'd do anything about my cows. I know you for the spineless whelp you are, Tolan! I know you come crawling to lick Ike Breen's boots when he toots his horn, like most of the others left in th' basin. But there're still a few left in the Chugwater who respect the law and want only peace. But they've stood about all they can of Breen's murdering and plundering and burning!"

"You're crazy!" Sheriff Tolan blared. "You can't fight Ike Breen. A few have tried it, and where are they now? You wouldn't have a chance, if Breen knowed you said such things."

"I want him to know it!" Jim Tantor ground out. "Get this, Tolan: I didn't expect you to go after my stolen cattle. I rode in to tell you that I'm making a little law of my own. Tell Ike Breen that for me. And also tell him that from now on, it's war!"

TANTOR turned, strode out onto Chugwater's hot, dusty street. Impatience and anger boiled inside of him, but he took time to go into a saloon and order a drink to cut the dust from his throat.

Probably a dozen men were in the barroom, some playing poker at the tables, some drinking at the drink-splattered bar. Hard-eyed, gun-belted.

Jim Tantor knew that this was Ike Breen's saloon, and the men there his hired gun-slingers, most of them. He didn't miss the open hostility in their cold eyes, or the knowing grins on the faces of some as they watched him. It was only the few men like Tantor left in the Basin who stood in the way of the complete domination of the Chugwater by such swaggering, loud-mouthed, gun-slinging bullies as these.

As Tantor finished his drink and started toward the door, he found his way barred by a burly, black-whiskered gent with a livid knife scar writhing across one side of his flat, pitted face.

"Hello, Tantor," the scar-faced gunman grinned. "It's sure too bad about them cows of yours!"

"What cows was that?" Jim asked, with deceptive softness.

"Why, the cows you got stole from you last night."

"That's funny," said Jim Tantor.

"Yeah, I lost some cows last night, but I hadn't told anybody about it, except the sheriff—and I just left there. It's plumb amazing how fast news gets about, ain't it?"

A snicker filtered through the crowd at the scar-faced gunman's ill-timed break. "Scarface" quit grinning, and an ugly light flared in his snaky eyes.

"You trying to get smart?" he snarled. "Can't no mangy two-bit cow-wrangler talk like that to me! You aiming to apologize?"

"For what?" Tantor demanded. "I only said—"

"I heard you! And I aim to—"

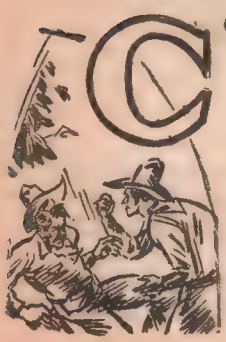
The scar-faced hombre's gun hand stabbed downward fast. But a hard fist blasted explosively into his hairy face. The blow, with all the pent-up savagery of Jim Tantor's hate and rage behind it, knocked the chunky gunman the length of the room. His shaggy head thudded soddenly against the wall and he slid gently to the floor, out cold.

Deliberately, Jim Tantor's cold, tawny eyes circled the unfriendly faces in the room. "Don't forget to tell Ike Breen about that," he said calmly, and then turned and stalked from the saloon.

He walked unhurriedly to his steel-dust gelding, the skin on his back crawling with the feel of deadly menace behind him. Then Jim Tantor mounted and rode out of town, headed toward his little Wineglass spread ten miles to the west.

CHAPTER II

Bushwhack Trap



CONFLICTING emotions tore at Jim Tantor as he rode across the rolling floor of the Basin. He knew that he'd just done a crazy thing—that he was fixing to do something a hell of a lot crazier.

The young cowman wanted peace, a chance to make something big out of the place he had started from scratch four years before. But he hadn't been allowed that chance for peace and advancement, and now his pent-up wrath had boiled over in hate and bitter resentment.

He meant to fight, even though he knew such a course could mean only defeat and probably a bushwhack death on the barrancas. For Ike Breen was as ruthless as he was powerful. Other ranchers, driven to reckless desperation by Breen's depredations, had tried to fight him, and only the hungry buzzards that forever wheeled about the lofty yellow domes of the Crazy Mountains knew what had become of them.

Jim Tantor knew these things, yet he meant to fight. He had held off, hoping desperately that the law would act. Now he knew that gun law was the only law in the Chugwater. A man's gun-wizardry was his only right to live and prosper.

Last night Breen's raiders had stolen the last Tantor had. They'd murdered Johnny Flint, a laughing, reckless-eyed kid who'd been one of the four riders with nerve enough to stick with him against Ike Breen's savage warfare. And now those other three were keeping grim-eyed vigil beside that youthful blanket-covered figure, waiting for Jim Tantor's return. That trip had been made to get cartridges and to take his message to Breen's figurehead sheriff.

It didn't take long to bury Johnny Flint under a gnarled old pine behind the Wineglass ranchhouse in the rude coffin the boys had fashioned. There was no ceremony, no preacher to speak a slow, solemn benediction over Johnny's grave, as Jim Tantor would have liked. There was nothing but the slow thud of hard clods on the coffin and the hidden thoughts of the four who had loved Johnny Flint.

After the last spadeful of dirt had fallen, they stood in silence for a moment. Beside Jim Tantor stood "Buck" Redman, squat, powerful, with a stained bandage about his wounded head. Across the grave was Bill Frost, a gaunt, hawk-faced Texan with fierce

longhorn mustaches; and the "Utah Kid," slim, red-haired, reckless-eyed. Gents who never spoke of their checkered past, these three, and lived only for the chance to repay Jim Tantor the debts they owed him.

Buck Redman looked down at the new grave and said softly, "Rest easy, Flint, we'll even the score for you!"

They went back to the ranchhouse. They saddled four wiry, long-legged broncs. On each saddle they strapped a rifle, a bedroll and a small supply of provisions. In the eyes of each, as they mounted and rode away from the ranch, was grim purpose, an impatient lust for vengeance.

They struck the trail of the stolen cattle in a little hollow on the plain and followed it due north for five miles. Then the trail swerved suddenly westward, toward the savage yellow crags of the Crazy Mountains that jutted bleakly against the blazing sky.

Jim Tantor had expected that. He knew that among those pitted yellow walls lay deadly peril. But without hesitation he led the little cavalcade on.

It was past mid-afternoon now and the sun beat down fiercely. A little while before sunset they reached the base of the hills. Travel became slower as they followed the trail of the stolen herd straight up among the frowning peaks. When darkness came, they made camp.

They made a fire back under the lip of a canyon wall, where it was hidden from any eyes that might be watching from the crags above. They talked little as they ate sparingly of the provisions they had brought.

The mountains, bulking black and shapeless against the night sky, seemed charged with nameless menace. Below, lost in the night, the purple floor of the basin unfolded. In his mind, Jim Tantor could place his own Wineglass outfit away to the southeast. Almost due east fifteen miles was Ike Breen's vast Wolfhead spread.

JIM KNEW that cattle stolen by Breen were never driven onto Wolfhead land. He knew that somewhere in the mountain wilderness above there was a little, diamond-shaped valley that narrowed at each end and formed a rocky pass between two peaks, opening a passage across the mountains and down onto the range beyond.

In this canyonlike valley was a tiny village, consisting of a score or more of log cabins and twice as many evil-faced men. Wild, lawless men who never left their mountain sanctuary except under the cover of night, and each one of them wanted for black crimes.

Ike Breen bossed these mountain wolves like he bossed a big part of the Chugwater Basin below To this valley he sent the cattle he stole in the Basin, until he had a ready market for stolen stuff. Jim Tantor knew that his stolen herd was headed for this lost valley of human wolves. He also knew he had but a slim chance of ever getting them back. But if he didn't get them back, he told himself, he'd get paid for them, one way or another!

Once, Jim Tantor had been close to that valley—close enough to sit up on the canyon walls and look down on the shacks and gun-belted men below. That was a year ago.

Out of curiosity he'd followed the trail of a rustled herd that had belonged to other ranchers in the Basin. He'd gone back and told a few ranchers whom he knew he could trust about it, but nothing had happened. Deadly fear of Ike Breen had spread like a plague over the Basin.

At dawn, the four took up the trail again. The going became slower. The pitted yellow walls hemmed them in. A hot wind moaned through the canyons.

By mid-morning, Jim Tantor knew that they were nearing Breen's outlaw valley. Occasionally, as they wound among the ravines and walls, they could see a narrow slit between two tall peaks only a few miles ahead. They rode slowly now, hands close to their guns, eyes alert.

Apparently there was no one on guard to keep them from entering the valley. It wasn't like Breen's men to be so careless. Jim Tantor sensed a trap and he

didn't like it. It was the Utah Kid who put it into words.

"I don't like it," he said. "Too quiet around here. It don't seem natural."

The four Wineglass riders rode on. Ahead, buildings loomed into view—a cabin and a shed built at the entrance to the valley and remote from the other shacks. There was no sign of anyone around, but the windows of the cabin were open from the bottom.

"Careful," Tantor warned softly as the quartet rode toward the cabin. "Something wrong here."

An instant later they all knew that Jim Tantor had been right. Men appeared in the windows of the cabin, and another stepped out from around the corner of the building. They all held guns in their hands and they started to blast bullets around the four riders.

Tantor and his men returned the fire, but those in the cabin were too well protected.

"Let's get out of here!" Jim Tantor shouted. "Back the way we came!"

They wheeled their horses and rode out of range of the men in the cabin. Swiftly they reloaded their guns. It seemed they were safe now, but suddenly Tantor knew they had blundered.

They were riding slowly along the sandy floor of a little swale that was three hundred yards across and rimmed on both sides by cliffs, when Jim caught a gleam of the sun on a rifle barrel high up on one of the walls. He yelled a warning, and his gelding leaped forward under the savage goad of his spurs.

At the same instant, a funnel of smoke and flame lashed out from the wall, followed by the rifle's roaring blast. The Utah Kid's hat leaped from his head, baring his flaming mane of hair to the burning sun. Other guns started to snarl from the cliffs on their right. Bullets snapped about them like a swarm of angry hornets, spurted up geysers of yellow sand about the threshing feet of their broncs.

The four Wineglass riders whirled their horses and pounded toward the cliffs for shelter from the murderous hail of lead. Then they dragged their frightened mounts back on their haunches. Blobs of flame and smoke were gushing out at them from these walls, too. Guns were pounding high up on the walls on both sides of them, catching them between a savage crossfire.

BITTERLY, Jim Tantor's gaze darted about for some avenue of escape, but there seemed to be none. Confused by the steady roar of gunfire, by the sting of lead, the four horses were whirling and bucking.

Redman and Bill Frost and the Utah Kid seemed bewildered as they turned first one way then another, looking for something to shoot at. Was this, Jim wondered dully, to be the end of his fight with Breen?

He saw Buck Redman's bronc rear straight up, heard its death scream as it crashed over backward. The squat Redman leaped clear. He braced himself on mighty legs, defiance blazing in his eyes as his rifle snaked up and blasted. Then Jim's bucking horse made him lose sight of Redman, and when he looked back the squat rider had dropped his rifle and was spinning around, blood streaming over his pain-racked face.

Then, all at once, Redman stopped his spinning. He dropped to the ground and lay with his head across his outflung arms.

Bitter curses at his helplessness boiled in Tantor's throat. His rifle was hot in his hand, but he knew he was wasting lead. He knew that there must be at least a score of men on the pitted walls, but he could see nothing but fogging powdersmoke and jetting flame. Gun thunder and the scream of lead pounded at his eardrums, while pain from a bullet wound in his thigh shot upward into his body.

He saw Bill Frost fling his empty rifle away, grab a long-barreled pistol in each hand and start blazing at the walls. The gaunt Texan looked at Jim Tantor, yelled something, turned and pointed toward the walls on the north.

Jim looked, and saw the head and shoulders of a man hanging from a fissure in the wall. As he stared, the

bushwhacker slid over the ledge and hurtled fifty feet to the rocks below.

When Jim turned his gaze back, Bill Frost's bronc was galloping, empty-saddled, across the sand, and Bill Frost was on the ground, on his knees. He looked up at Tantor, grinned, tried to get to his feet but couldn't make it. He slumped suddenly to the ground and lay still, smoking guns still gripped in his hands.

An icy hand seemed to be clamping down on Jim Tantor's heart. A savage cry rose in his throat as he discarded his rifle and snaked out his belt guns. Conscious only of the killing fury in his brain, he spurred the wild-eyed gelding straight toward the north walls, guns kicking and roaring in his hands.

But the big gelding stopped suddenly. A shuddering tremor went through its magnificent body, then its shrill scream rang out above the gunfire. It whirled and started running back down the mountainside.

With all his strength, Jim Tantor sought to stop the pain-maddened beast, to turn its head back toward the cliffs. But the gelding leaped on, a shuddering moan wrenched from its throat each time it hit the ground. Jim knew that the steel-dust was running nearly dead on its feet.

He flung a glance back over his shoulder. The Utah Kid stood alone, misty ropes of powdersmoke curling snakishly about his slim figure as he triggered his guns. The Kid was grinning his reckless defiance as he blazed away, his long red hair glinting in the sunshine.

By now, Jim Tantor was well out from between that murderous crossfire. The gelding was still running blindly. A shallow gully yawned ahead. The steel-dust bunched its tortured muscles for the leap, faltered and crashed head-first into the fissure.

Flung clear, Tantor landed with a jarring thud on the far side of the gully. Stunned, the breath smashed from his body, he fought to his feet. Wiping sweat and blood from his burning eyes, he looked back along the floor of the sandy swale. A sob of rage came from between his clenched teeth. Riderless, the Utah Kid's roan was galloping up the mountainside, away from him. The Kid lay sprawled on the ground.

Then Tantor saw mounted men at the base of the walls. They were yelling, pointing toward him as they came, guns in hand, the eager look of hunting dogs in their eyes.

Jim Tantor knew that he had one chance in a thousand of eluding that bloodthirsty pack. Fighting the searing pain that rolled over him, he turned and leaped toward the mouth of a rocky ravine, reloading his guns as he ran.

CHAPTER III

Back from Hell

BY WHAT miracle he remained alive during the next twenty-four hours, Jim Tantor never knew. They were long, nightmarish hours of fighting, running, dodging and hiding, as he sought by every trick he knew to throw Ike Breen's baying gun-dogs off his trail. A dozen times he escaped death by a hairbreadth.

An hour at a time he lay without moving, racked with fierce pain from his wounds, with ants making fiery trails over his body, while hot-eyed killers beat the brush about him.

With the coming of night, a white moon slid into the sky. But the darkness did not send the outlaws back to their lair. They rode with drawn guns along the walls and ravines, or crouched motionless in shadowy places, waiting for Jim Tantor to move.

Death would have been easy compared to the agony Tantor went through, but he was remembering Buck Redman and Bill Frost and the Utah Kid, back there behind him. Over and over in his brain sounded the words Buck Redman had spoken beside Johnny Flint's grave:

"Rest easy, Flint, we'll even the score for you!"

Far in the night he came to an icy stream, where he quenched his burning thirst. But he didn't stay with the stream, didn't bathe his tired, feverish body in the cold water. He knew that Breen's killers would be expecting him to stay there.

He climbed wearily out of the shallow canyon to its rim. He lay on the hard rock a while, straining his ears for some sound that would tell him his pursuers were near. But he heard nothing, saw nothing.

For a long time he didn't move. He felt the near presence of something, man or animal. He had the feeling that unseen eyes were probing among the shadows for him.

As time passed and there was no movement along the canyon rim, Jim decided that he'd been wrong. He got to his feet and moved stealthily downstream along the rim.

A blaze of flame lashed suddenly from the shadows not fifty feet away. Jim Tantor flung himself aside, feeling the hot breath of the bullet as it fanned his cheek. He stumbled, tried desperately to pull himself back from the rim of the chasm that yawned blackly below him. But the rotten shale gave way under his clawing feet. He felt himself falling.

"Got him!" he heard a voice below cry with harsh triumph. "Now we can go back home!"

Instead of the fanglike rocks that he expected to rip his body to pieces, Jim Tantor plunged head-first into icy water. Weak from strain and loss of blood, he fought his way to the surface and to shallow water. He could hear excited voices on the rim. A moment later, several men clambered down the broken wall.

No light from the moon reached the canyon bed, but on the opposite side of the stream Jim could make out an overhanging ledge. It took the last of his strength to swim across to it and creep back beneath its overhanging lip.

He could hear Breen's gunslingers tramping along the opposite side of the stream. Straight across from him, they stopped. A match flared, lighting half a dozen bearded, wolfish faces.

"You sure you plugged that gent?" a voice asked. "I don't see his body nowhere."

"I got him, all right," said that harsh voice. "I couldn't of missed, that close. I saw him go over the wall."

"I heard him hit the water," volunteered a third man. "I guess he didn't come up. Hell, let's go home and get some shuteye. Breen just said beef him —he didn't say lug his body in!"

THAT suggestion seemed to meet with general approval, and the killers climbed back out of the canyon. Fearing a trick, Jim Tantor crouched there under the ledge for what seemed like hours. But convinced finally that the outlaws had departed, he left the water.

It took him the biggest part of an hour to climb back to the rim, but he didn't stop to rest. He knew that, even now, his chance for life was slim. He was weak as a new-born baby, half crazy with pain and delirium. His clothes hung in shreds on his torn body.

Reeling like a drunken man, he headed down the mountain. He walked on and on. He wanted to stop, to rest, but he wouldn't let himself do it, for he knew that if he did he'd never get started again. A mist boiled in his brain and fever pulsed hotly through his body.

For hours he walked, then suddenly he knew that it was day again. He could feel the hot sun stabbing at his bare head, burning into his eyeballs. After a long time, he knew that he was out of the hills. But he kept going, falling, crawling, stumbling to his feet again.

Things danced before his eyes. He thought his eyes and brain were playing tricks on him when he saw a girl riding toward him across the plain. She was slim and dark-haired, dressed in boots, short riding skirt and an elkskin jacket. Jim Tantor stopped and looked at her with dead, pain-filled eyes.

"You ain't fooling me," he croaked harshly. "You ain't real. That ain't water you've got in that canteen!"

The girl dismounted and came toward

him. He could see the pity in her eyes. Her voice was low, soothing.

"I'm real, cowboy," she said. "Here, let me help you."

Jim sat down heavily. She was real, all right. He could feel her strong young arms about his shoulders, the canteen at his parched lips. As the water trickled down his throat, all the strength seemed to go out of him. As if from a great distance, he heard the girl's voice:

"Stick it a while longer, cowboy. I've got to get you onto my horse and to the ranchhouse. Understand? Try to help me."

He did try to help her. Somehow, she got him into the saddle, climbed up behind him. Vaguely, Jim Tantor knew that they were riding across the plain, her arms steadying him in the saddle. The mist deepened in his brain. . . .

It was another day and night before Jim Tantor fully regained consciousness. Then he realized he was lying on a clean bed, in a strange room, and that his wounds had been washed and dressed. The slim, dark-haired girl would come into the room, bend over him, give him water, watch over him. And there was a man—a rawboned, bearded, grim-eyed oldster.

At times, Jim knew he was safe. But there were other times when he writhed in torment, reliving in his delirium those hellish hours as he crawled and dodged and fought Breen's gun-slicks in the mountains.

Then, after a deep sleep, he awoke with a brain now clear. He was weak, and fierce pain threaded through his body, but Jim Tantor knew he'd be on his feet again before long.

AS HE looked at her questioningly, the girl said smiling, "That's better. You've been awfully sick, but you'll be all right now. Hungry?"

Jim Tantor nodded. She left the room and returned with steaming food. She lifted him up in bed in order that he could eat.

"I'm Helen Darcy," she told him. "This is the Crazy J Ranch, and I live here with my father, John Darcy."

She didn't ask him who he was, or why he had been reeling across the plain, more dead than alive. Tantor knew old John Darcy as one of the few honest, fighting ranchers left in the Basin. And from one end of the Chugwater to the other tales were told of Helen Darcy's breath-taking beauty.

After eating, Jim Tantor slept again. When he awoke again it was night. John Darcy was in the room. Simply, Jim told Darcy of the murderous battle in the mountains and the pain-filled hours following.

"What do you aim to do now?" Darcy asked.

"Fight," said Jim Tantor. "Breen may kill me, like he killed my men, but I'm not licked yet!"

Darcy shook his grizzled head, "If we had more men like you in the Basin, we might get somewhere. The ranchers in this end of the valley have been holding meetings lately. We've formed a pool, to fight Ike Breen.

"Maybe, when I tell them how your boys was drygulched and murdered, it'll make them mad enough to fight. If we could plug that passage over the mountains, so Breen couldn't get his stolen stuff out of the Basin, it'd cripple him."

"We've got to do more than stop Breen's rustling," Jim said grimly. "As long as Ike Breen lives, the Chugwater will be a hell of fear and death and slavery."

"Breen needs killing," John Darcy agreed slowly. "*I'll* kill him, if he comes around pestering my girl any more!"

"I can handle him," the dark-eyed girl said quickly, coming into the room. "Breen hasn't bothered us yet, but he will if you make him angry. I'll tell you when I can't handle him."

Quick anger stabbed at Jim Tantor at the thought of Ike Breen bothering Helen Darcy. But it was only one of the many dark thoughts that plagued his mind, during the next few days, as he slowly regained his strength.

For long hours he lay by a window and stared, bitter-eyed, across the plain, fighting the impatience within him. The tired ghosts of Johnny Flint and Buck

Redman, of Bill Frost and the Utah Kid, stalked restlessly through the bleak corridors of his soul, clamoring for vengeance.

Helen Darcy was always cheerful, smiling, as she watched over him. But Tantor didn't miss the shadows of fear that came into her violet eyes at times.

"The boys are fighting mad," John Darcy told him once. "The pool's gaining new members. It won't be long now till we're ready to fight Ike Breen."

It was three days after coming to the Crazy J that Jim Tantor saw a horseman riding across the plain toward the ranchhouse. The rider and the big, silver-bedecked black he rode were familiar.

It was Ike Breen—big, with dark, arrogant features, flashily and expensively dressed, with silver-handled guns in an ornamented gun-belt about his thickening waist.

CHAPTER IV

Breen Bares His Fangs

TANTOR'S gun-belt and guns dangled from a bed post. He started to reach for them, then lay back. If Ike Breen thought he'd been killed in the mountains, it would be better if he didn't learn the truth for a while.

The young cowman heard Breen as he rode up to the ranchhouse and dismounted. Heard the thud of his fancily etched boots as he entered the front room without knocking.

Jim Tantor knew that John Darcy was out on the range, and that Helen Darcy was in the next room alone. Through the closed door, he heard Helen's low, cool voice.

"Father isn't here," the girl said clearly. "He won't be back until night."

"That's fine!" he heard Ike Breen say. "I hoped he wouldn't be here. He'd just be in the way."

"Why do you keep coming here?" Helen Darcy asked, her voice edged with anger.

"Isn't that a f o o l i s h question?" Breen's laugh was like the deep purring of a big cat. "You bring me here. I couldn't stay away if I wanted to—and I don't want to! I want you—and I usually get what I want!"

"We've talked that over before," Helen said. "I wish you'd go away."

Tantor didn't catch what Breen said then. The voices in the next room droned on. At times they were low; then they would rise until Tantor could hear what was being said. But he could tell what was happening.

Breen's voice now was amused, but eager and relentless. Helen's was angry, a little desperate.

Desperation gripped Jim Tantor then. He wanted to grab a gun, go to the door and start blasting away at Ike Breen. But he was still weak, his body sore and stiff. And he knew it would be foolish to disclose his presence. Better to let Breen think him dead, until he was strong enough to fight again.

But he had no choice—the sounds in the next room told him that. He eased himself off the bed, snaked one of the guns from its holster. His head reeled, but somehow he made it to the door and opened it.

At the sound, Ike Breen jerked around. When he saw Jim Tantor, his mouth gaped with amazement. The suave mask of arrogance and confidence dropped from his cruel features. He stared, like a man who doesn't believe in ghosts but knows he is seeing one.

A murderous anger coursed through Jim Tantor as he faced the man who had ruined him and murdered his best friends. He wanted to kill Ike Breen, without giving him any more of a chance than Johnny Flint and Bill Frost and the others had had. But when he tried to pull trigger, he found that he couldn't do it.

"No, I'm not a ghost, Breen," he laughed harshly. "You'll have to send your gun-dogs out again. Now, get out and stay out!"

Arrogant confidence returned to Breen's face, but he was careful to keep his hands away from his silver-handled guns. A crafty light seeped into his inky eyes.

"You must be crazy, Tantor," he said softly. "I didn't try to have you gunned out. I heard that you had some trouble in the mountains, but I didn't—"

"Get out!" Jim Tantor spat.

Ike Breen didn't bluster or threaten, but he didn't try to hide the wolfish hate and anger on his dark face as he stalked from the room, mounted the black gelding and spurred savagely away across the plain.

HELEN DARCY, a new light in her soft eyes, helped Jim Tantor back to his room.

"We've got to get you away from here," said John Darcy, when he returned late that evening. "Now that Breen knows you're alive, he won't rest till he kills you. You're too dangerous, to Breen, to live. You know about that secret valley up in the mountains, and Breen realizes that if it becomes generally known it'll do a lot of damage, if not ruin him. You're doomed, boy, unless you stay outa Ike Breen's reach."

"I don't like the idea of running from that skunk," Tantor objected.

"It's run or be killed. Breen'll come back here, but he won't come alone, and he won't make any mistake next time. We've got to hide you, at least till you're back on your feet again."

"I know a place," Helen spoke up quickly to her father. "That hidden cave I discovered over along the river. Nobody'd ever find him there. And I could take him food every day, and—"

Jim Tantor cursed his own helplessness, but he knew they were right. If he stayed here it would cause trouble for John Darcy and his daughter. So he permitted them to load him onto a horse again, along with blankets and food, and they set out toward the low hills behind the ranchhouse.

At the base of the hills they came to a shallow, swift-flowing stream and followed its course for half a mile. At a spot where the stream plunged between steep walls, Helen Darcy dismounted on a rock ledge. On the ledge was a nest of granite boulders that concealed a black gash in the cliff behind them. They helped Jim Tantor into the deep, dry cave, made a comfortable bed for him.

"Breen won't find you here," Darcy declared confidently. "And tomorrow if the coast is clear, someone will ride out to see how you're making out."

Bitter loneliness descended on Jim after they left. He lay there in the cave and watched shadows slink into the canyon and deepen into night. He found that the physical effort in riding here had helped his sore muscles, that he could move about without great effort.

He went out onto the ledge. The chill night air refreshed him, but it couldn't drive the turmoil from his brain.

Helen Darcy came to the cave the next morning, bringing freshly cooked food.

"Ike Breen and four of his gunmen came to the Crazy J last night," she told him, her eyes shadowy with worry. "Breen wanted you, and he flew into a rage when he found you weren't there. He threatened to—"

"What did he threaten to do?" Jim Tantor asked.

"Nothing in particular," she said evasively. "Don't you worry about us, Jim Tantor. Trouble with Breen was bound to come sooner or later. Breen wants me, even asked me to marry him. For a long time I tried not to let him see my utter loathing for him, hoping to keep his killers away from the Crazy J. But lately— Well, you know what happened yesterday."

"I've brought trouble to you folks," Jim said somberly. "You mustn't come here any more. Breen might be watching the ranch. I'll make out somehow."

Helen Darcy laughed softly. "Don't be silly!" she said. "I've helped you this far, and I won't stop now. I feel sort of responsible for you."

To this, Jim Tantor had no answer. Their eyes met, held for a moment. Then a blush flamed in Helen Darcy's tanned cheeks and she turned her eyes away.

"Father wanted you to know the ranchmen's pool was meeting tonight," she murmured. "Feeling against Breen is white-hot, and the ranchers are getting ready for a final showdown against Breen's crowd."

ON THE following day, Helen Darcy came back to the cave, and the next day. But on the third day she didn't appear, and Jim knew the reason.

All that morning he'd heard sounds of horsemen prowling along the river bank. Once a bearded, hard-faced gunman rode along the middle of the stream, eyes alert and with rifle in hand, passing no more than thirty feet away from the cave mouth.

But Helen Darcy came to the cave the next morning. Fear had deepened in her dark eyes and there were marks on her wrists and throat.

"Breen was at the ranch again yesterday," she told Jim. "He tried to make me tell where you were hidden. He"—she held out her wrists mutely in explanation. "And," she added, "he threatened to drive off all our cattle and burn the ranch."

Haggard-faced, Jim Tantor listened to her. His body was still sore and stiff, but his wounds had almost healed.

"That's just one more thing Ike Breen'll have to pay for," he said harshly. "And I won't stay here any longer. I aim to show myself, so Breen will know you're not hiding me. I won't let you run the risk of—"

"Not now," she begged. "Tomorrow, if you must—not today. At last the ranchers are ready to strike. They've set tomorrow night as the time for the showdown with Breen, and they want you with them, if you're able to ride."

"I'll wait, then," Jim agreed restlessly. "But Breen—if he comes to the ranch—"

"I don't think he will," Helen said. "I'll ride back here about mid-afternoon tomorrow and bring you a horse. Then I'll ride with you to the Diamond Bar Ranch, where the ranchers are to meet at sunset."

Helen Darcy didn't come to the cave the next afternoon. It was old John Darcy who came riding along the stream, reeling in the saddle, clothing in shreds on his gaunt body, his bearded face blood-streaked and ghastly with pain. Behind him the wounded oldster led a saddled bronc.

John Darcy gasped out his story in terse sentences. Two hours before, Ike Breen, flanked by a dozen of his gunslicks, had swept down upon the Crazy J. They had forced their way into the ranchhouse and shot Darcy down in cold blood when he showed fight. Thinking him lying dead there on the floor, they'd rounded up two hundred head of Crazy J cattle and driven them off toward the mountains.

But that was not what set red rage to hammering at Jim Tantor's brain. It was the fact that with him into the mountains Ike Breen had taken along pretty Helen Darcy!

"I regained consciousness in time to see them ride away," John Darcy said wretchedly. "I couldn't do nothing alone, so I saddled a coupla broncs and started after you. Breen's taking my girl and my cattle to that hidden valley you told us about, sure as hell! And you're the only one that knows the way there. You able to ride, boy?"

"Try and stop me," Jim Tantor clipped, and hurried into the cave after his guns.

He returned, strapping his gun-belt about his lean waist, and leaped into the saddle of the powerful roan that Darcy had brought for him.

"We'll hit for the Diamond Bar," said John Darcy. "The sun'll be down by the time we get there, and the boys'll be waiting. You'll have to show us the way to that hell-hole up there."

"*You're* riding to the Diamond Bar!" Jim Tantor said harshly. "*I'm* riding into the mountains—now! You go on to the Diamond Bar and bring the ranchers on as fast as you can. I'll tell you how to get to that valley."

Quickly, tersely, he told John Darcy how to find Breen's outlaw hideout. Then he was away with a thunder of hoofs.

Jim rode with set face, with wild rage and hate churning in his heart. The sun was dipping low now, staining the peaks above as if a bloody brush had been raked across their notched crests. A hot wind beat at him as the big roan thundered straight up into the hills.

The sun went down. Shadows raced with him up from the lowlands, passed him, swirled about the barbaric peaks above. Then a round moon was in the sky, pointing the way with silvery fingers of light.

Relentlessly, Tantor guided the roan on through the night. Recklessly he stormed along ridges, blind to the peril of yawning canyons and treacherous shale.

CHAPTER V

Guns for the Doomed

AS HE thundered on, Jim tried to plan some course of action, but his brain was confused. He could think only of Helen Darcy, up there in the night in the clutches of the ruthless and power-mad Ike Breen. He didn't feel the savage pain that went lancing through his unhealed body. All the passion that he'd kept bottled up had been unleashed in a bitter torrent of impatience and hate.

Jim Tantor knew that the injustices that he'd suffered at the hands of Ike Breen had faded to insignificance. Helen Darcy—the rangeland girl who had saved him from death, watched over him, suffered for him—was all that mattered, now.

Then, suddenly, the narrow, rock-lipped mouth of the outlaw valley gaped blackly before him. A short distance below the pass he dismounted and left the big roan standing with drooping head and wet, heaving sides. Breen would have lookouts at the valley entrance, Jim knew. He advanced cautiously, keeping to the shadows.

The pass, a deep gash between broken, pitted walls of rock, was a hundred yards wide, its gully-slashed floor covered by brush and boulders. The slanting moonbeams spent themselves on the walls, throwing the pass floor into dusky shadows.

Watching, Jim saw the red glow of a cigarette in a fissure in the wall on one side of the pass. And a moment later, another glow came from the opposite wall, and it reflected on the barrel of a rifle. Guards of the pass, Jim was certain.

Jim's seething impatience and fear for Helen Darcy wouldn't let him huddle there in the brush and wait for the coming of the ranchers. Flinging himself flat on the ground, he started inching forward. Flattened against the rough ground, he moved into the pass.

With maddening slowness he wriggled through underbrush and over boulders. He wanted, more than he'd ever wanted anything, to dash madly on through the pass. But he knew that a sudden move, the clatter of a stone, might bring the attention of the riflemen on the walls.

A cigarette butt from one of the walls made a fiery arc in the air, landing only a few feet from him. He lay still for a moment, then inched forward again. Now he was even with the lookouts—and then was past them. The pass began to widen. Jim got to his feet and began to run.

The pass became a diamond-shaped valley, with a rocky funnel at each end. Half a mile away, straggling along the banks of a shallow little stream that slashed across the valley floor, was a huddle of cabins. Lights glowed in some of the windows. The sounds of ribald merriment came to Jim Tantor as he headed toward the shacks.

Murky light glowed in some of the cabin windows, others were dark. Shadowy figures moved among them. Cigarettes glowed in dark places. Sounds of drunken revelry filled the night. These outcasts, Tantor saw with amazement, had women here—abandoned, conscienceless creatures as law-

less as Ike Breen's gunmen.

Impatience burned fiercely inside Tantor as he walked among the huts. Somewhere among this jumble of hovels, somewhere among this drunken hilarity and revelry, was Helen Darcy. And, doubtless, Ike Breen was with her.

No one so much as glanced at Tantor. Bearded, hard-eyed men jostled against him. Couples went past him, arms about each other. Somebody strummed a guitar softly in the shadows. "Breen's got his woman, at last," said a voice behind Jim.

A woman's voice answered, high-pitched, spiteful. "I hope he's satisfied! He's been wanting her long enough. Thought he was too good for the girls here in the valley!"

JIM TANTOR turned slowly. A man and a woman stood in the shadows of a cabin near by. They were engrossed in each other.

"He might have his hands full," chuckled the man. "She looked like a spitfire to me. Where are they now?"

"In his cabin," the woman sneered.

The talk turned to other matters, and Jim eased away. In Breen's cabin—but which one was Breen's cabin? At that instant, the question answered itself. A scream cut through the night, coming from a squat shack directly ahead of Jim Tantor.

He heard the woman laugh throatily behind him. Then he was snaking along the wall of Breen's cabin, lips set in a furious snarl. He passed a blinded window, went on to the front door. There was deep silence inside the hut now.

Jim didn't stop to consider the folly of showing himself in Breen's lair. Gun in hand, he placed his powerful shoulder against the door and shoved. Unlocked, the barrier crashed inward.

Ike Breen whirled as Tantor lunged into the room. His inky eyes flared with amazement as he saw Jim Tantor. Shock tore through Tantor as he saw Helen Darcy, the stark fear in her lovely eyes. A glad little cry broke from her lips as she wrenched from Breen's grasp and ran to Jim.

"Tantor!" Ike Breen mouthed, the suavity gone from his evil features. "You can't— How'd you get in here?"

Jim fought back the harsh, savage curses that boiled up in his throat. His voice was flat, deadly. "Breen, you don't deserve to live. And you won't live—for I'm gonna kill you now!"

Ike Breen saw a ruthless, murderous gleam in Tantor's eyes. His face blanched, worked with fear.

"Wait!" he begged. "I'll let you and the girl ride away from here. I'll—I'll do anything! You can't murder me like I was a thieving dog!"

"No?" Jim Tantor ground out. "You're a thousand times lower than a thieving dog, Breen! You've got no more right to live than a snake! You've burned, robbed, murdered long enough. If you think praying will help your evil, selfish soul when it's frying in hell, you'd better pray now!"

Slowly, his hands trembling with the fear of death that held him, Ike Breen took his ornate gun-belt and silver-handled guns from about his waist and laid them on the rickety table in the center of the room. He raised his hands into the air.

"If you kill me you'll have murder on your soul, Tantor," he whimpered. "A man with murder on his soul can't rest, can't sleep! You can't murder me, Tantor, you can't!"

Suddenly, Jim knew that Breen was right. He couldn't murder a man in cold blood, not even Ike Breen. He strode forward, took one of Breen's .45s from its holster and laid it on the table. Beside it he placed his own gun. Then he faced Breen across the table, his eyes like golden chips of ice in the murky lamplight.

"You're right, Breen," he said harshly. "I can't murder even you. You don't deserve it, but I aim to give you a chance for your miserable life. There're two guns in the middle of the table. In less than thirty seconds I'm going to grab one of them and start shooting. There's another gun for you. Take your choice. Grab it, or stand with your hands

(Continued on page 129)

Sidetracked in His Vengeance Quest, Tully O'Neill

HARD TO KILL

CHAPTER I

Ride of Revenge

THE black stallion paused for a breather at the crest of the rise, and Tully O'Neill, astride him, stared down at the lush valley far below. There were trees there, and grass and water, and sprawling ranch buildings in the *hacienda* style, well-kept, prosperous. The sight should have brought pleasure to any man, but there was none in the smoldering gaze of Tully O'Neill.

He tilted back his big hat and mopped sweat and dust from his lean young face. It was hot; though the westering sun was almost lost beyond the towering Jacintos, and O'Neill and the big black had come a long way. Goliath, O'Neill's

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is Swept into the Tide of a Roaring Range War!

"Get back," O'Neill snapped, "or I'll down the whole bunch of you!"

A Complete Novelet by TOM GUNN

stallion, whinnied a little, craned his neck. O'Neill stiffened in the saddle. There was a rider coming in on him from the left. Without looking he loosened his gun in its holster and waited tensely.

The rider broke cover from a clump of cottonwoods, and halted. Tully O'Neill saw that it was a girl who was coming toward him. She sat her mount easily, her dark eyes watchful, suspicious.

O'Neill lifted his hat with grave courtesy. "Howdy, ma'am. Reckon that'll be the Lazy H below?"

"Yes," she said tersely, and added: "Who are you and what business have

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you at the Lazy H?"

"Not meaning to be disrespectful, ma'am," O'Neill answered, "my business at the Lazy H don't concern anybody but me and a party by the name of Jim—uh—Henderson."

The girl's eyes narrowed. Tully had sensed a tension in her before, a sort of pent-up antagonism which he was at a loss to account for. He had never seen her before in his life. As a matter of fact, this country was new to him.

The girl's brown hand dropped to the Colt at her waist. "Jim Henderson is my father, stranger. I'm Marcy Henderson, and I'm asking you again, who are you?"

O'NEILL sat very still for a moment. It wasn't her gun, nor her manner. It was just that he hadn't thought about the man Henderson having a daughter. The knowledge seemed to complicate things for Tully O'Neill. Before it had all been so simple. That is, it was simple enough after at last getting trace of the man. Just a couple of guns in a swift draw, and after that one man would walk away and the other man would lie there.

O'Neill's lips straightened in a thin, hard line across his tanned face. Well, it was still simple. Girl or no girl, he had a job to do. He tugged his hat down over his eyes.

"Sorry, ma'am. My name wouldn't mean anything to you. Get along, Goliath." The black started down the slope. The girl's voice, furious, on edge, came to him.

"Halt!" she called out, "or I'll shoot!" There was the swift beat of hoofs, a shot. Tully's hat lifted from his head. He halted and the girl reined up beside him. "Now, I guess you'll tell me who you are!"

Without warning, faster than light his lean brown hand shot out, twisted the girl's gun from her grasp. She struck him with her quirt. An angry welt leaped out on his cheek. Blue eyes blazed into sombre black, then he gripped her, not roughly, but very firmly about the waist. He lifted her high out of the saddle, stood her on her feet. Small fists beat at him. He pinioned her wrists with one hand, then slapped the mare's rump with the other.

The animal rocketed off down the slope. O'Neill released the raging girl, flicked Goliath lightly with the rowels. They left her there on foot, speechless, white with pent-up fury.

"A vixen, Goliath," said Tully O'Neill. "A chip off the old block, only mebbe not so sneakin'." Goliath nodded his great head sagely.

A man limped out of the bunkhouse, shaded his eyes against the setting sun. O'Neill cursed a little. The girl's shot had more than likely warned the whole spread. He made a wide detour to miss the man, galloped Goliath across a narrow foot bridge, and brought up sharply before the wide veranda of the main house.

The black's forefeet lifted high at the sudden jerk. There was a man on the porch, but at the sight of him something went out of O'Neill's eyes. All the eagerness, all the pent-up emotion of twenty years of hating was wiped out, leaving nothing but a sullen, smoldering rage. The man was Henderson, all right, or so he called himself now, but he was a cripple. He sat there, both arms bandaged to his sides, and the very bandages seemed to mock O'Neill; to tell him that he couldn't do what he had come there to do.

It was like stumbling across an endless desert only to find that the waterhole was a mirage. He yanked at the bit savagely and Goliath reared again. O'Neill lifted his gun. He'd do it anyway. The man didn't deserve an even break. A red haze floated before Tully's eyes as he thumbed the hammer, then his gun sagged. He couldn't do it; no, he couldn't.

Henderson's voice, seeming to come from a long way off, said: "'Pears like you want to smoke me, but can't, stranger. How come? Who are you?"

O'Neill's voice sounded hoarse in his ears. "The name," he said, "is Tully O'Neill."

"O'Neill!" The hazy old face got the

color of 'dobe mud; the pain-wracked eyes opened wide and there was a terrible fear in them. "Not—not old Tully's button? Why, you were only a—a little shaver!"

"Yeah," O'Neill grated. "Twenty years is a long time, Jim Hellman."

The grizzled head nodded, stiffly. "All right, son, you've done caught up with me. I guess I deserve whatever you're passin' out."

THERE came the swift pounding of feet along the veranda, a sharp command: "Drop the gun, hombre. Drop it, I say!" It was the girl. O'Neill turned dead eyes on her, eyes that were hopeless, discouraged. Nothing mattered now. His shoulders drooped wearily, but he didn't drop the gun. He just sat there, looking at her.

The old man's voice roused him. "No, Marcy, put down that gun! He's a—a friend of mine!"

Tully O'Neill's lip lifted in a crooked grin. A friend! He stared at the girl. Her gun dropped to her side, but her eyes were still watchful, appraising, as she faced her father.

"A friend, Dad? How can he be? What's his name and why does he look at you like that?"

Henderson avoided her eyes, but his voice was steady enough. It seemed as if he were trying to convey some hidden message to O'Neill. "A friend, Marcy. At least, the son of an old friend. Yuh'll light down and stay with us for a few days, O'Neill?" There was a mute plea in the invitation—and a promise. "I'll be able to swing a gun in a week or two, son."

Jim Henderson was trying to tell Tully that he'd give him his chance if he'd wait; and trying to keep the girl from knowing. "We've been having trouble on the Lazy H, son. Mebbe you'll stay and help?"

Tully O'Neill found a sort of sardonic humor in the situation. Waiting for the old man to get well so he could burn him down and pretending to be a friend. Well, why not? Eating some of the grub he'd been denied all these years, grub that really belonged to him—that would be kind of funny, huh?

"Yeah," the cowboy said. "Yeah, sure, Henderson. Glad to help out an old *friend.*" He lifted his hat in mock courtesy to the girl. "Glad to know you, Miss Henderson. The name is Tully O'Neill." He wheeled Goliath, sent him at a trot down to the corrals.

Darkness had fallen, the swift darkness of the West, when Marcy Henderson found O'Neill. He was leaning on the low colt corral, arms propped on the top rail, staring at nothing in particular, unless it was the long vista of years behind him; years of hunger, or privation, of wearing people's cast-off clothes till he was big enough to buy his own. That part was pretty bad, but it was a slashing, poisonous hate that had eaten into his soul. Folks had hated the father, so the boy was hated too; the little boy who was only seven when they had sent the old man to prison; the little boy whom they had made into a killer by the time his father got out.

He'd had to fight all his life, it seemed. Fight to eat, fight to live; but mostly it had been a fight because they had hounded him so. The son of a thief, he must be a thief himself. The son of a jail-bird—that's all he was. It didn't matter that they were all lies—every one of 'em.

Marcy touched his arm lightly. "Can't we be friends, Tully O'Neill? I'm sorry."

He whirled. Had the old man told her? No, not much danger of that! A man who'd ridden away as Jim Henderson had done twenty years before! Well, it wasn't in the cards for him to tell.

Tully shook off her hand. "Sorry!" he said bitterly. "Sorry for what?"

"Sorry I shot at you, quirted you." She looked different now, more gentle, younger. Maybe it was the moon that did it. O'Neill felt oddly embarrassed. And then it came to him, why she was there. She was trying to beg him off. The old man had sent her, of course.

"Forget it," he said, gruffly.

"Then we're friends, Tully O'Neill?" She smiled up at him. "You see, we've had so much trouble here at the Lazy H, so much thieving and killing that there's

nobody we can trust any more. We're suspicious of any stranger and you looked sort of—well sort of vengeful." She laughed a little, nervously. "So that's why I'm so glad you're going to be on our side."

O'Neill laughed, too, though it wasn't a pleasant sound. On their side. Hah! That was good.

"Well, I hear the boys coming in," he said. "Guess I'll go wash up." He strode over to the bunkhouse, limping a little, because that last wound, the one he'd got down El Paso way, hadn't quite healed.

CHAPTER II

Slow-but-Certain O'Neill

YOUNG Tully O'Neill had splashed water from the bucket, and was wiping his head vigorously when the first of the riders dismounted. Tully looked at the man, a big, red-headed devil with a rolling swagger to his walk. The giant snaked out a long arm, snatched the towel off O'Neill's head.

"Who are you, fella?" Then he bent closer, stared. "Well, blow me down! Slow-but-certain O'Neill!"

Tully didn't know the man from Adam's off ox. "Yeah," he said. "I'm O'Neill, but you're one up on me, pardner. What's your handle?"

The other men were on the ground now, four of them. O'Neill saw that they all carried the marks of recent battle. Two had their arms in slings.

The red-headed giant chuckled suddenly. "I'm Strang, the ramrod of this outfit. You was pointed out to me one time in Vegas. Know who this is, fellers? This here is Slow-but-certain O'Neill, called such on account of he never was very fast, but he wouldn't lie down till the other party couldn't get up. Slow-but-certain. Well, I'll be jiggered. What you doin' 'way up here?"

Suddenly the girl was in the circle. "A killer!" she flared. "I might have known it! And probably a jailbird, too! Maybe that's why you're so pale under your tan. Jail pallor!" She was like the wind, this girl. Soft and gentle one minute, a shrew the next. "Take him, Strang! He means us harm!"

Like a streak of light, O'Neill's gun was out. He didn't shoot, just stood there leaning carelessly against the wall. The giant looked at him, looked at the girl. The four men shuffled uneasily.

Marcy stamped her foot. "Cowards!" she flung out. Just the one word, then she swung and headed for the ranchhouse. The moon made little golden highlights in her hair.

O'Neill chuckled. "Relax, gents. I'm here by invitation of Jim Henderson himself. Just happens that Marcy Henderson don't like me very much."

He holstered his gun, turned his back on them and went into the bunkhouse. No one followed him, but he could hear mutters outside, the splashing and gurgling as the men washed up. They didn't unsaddle. Presently they trooped in, stamping, sniffing the smells from the cook-shack.

Red Strang came in last. He sat down beside O'Neill and from his manner O'Neill guessed he'd been up to the house. They ate in silence, the man who limped serving them. After a while Strang put down his coffee cup, lit a cigarette.

"The old man says you're okay, O'Neill. Says not to bother you. I won't if you remember one thing; stay clear of Marcy." Jealousy flared for an instant in his pale eyes, was gone. "She's mine."

"I'll remember," O'Neill said. As if he wanted her! "I'll bear that in mind, Strang." And then, curiously: "Looks like a war around here. What's it about?"

They told him, grudgingly, a little at a time. Rustlers. Big-time stuff. Herds vanishing overnight without leaving a sign of a trail. Fence cut here and there but beyond that, nothing. The Lazy H was stripped to the bone, and the old man needed the money, too.

"Why?" O'Neill inquired.

"Because," said Strang, "party by the name of Vance Stryker is holdin' a mortgage on the old man. They used to be pardners; owned mighty near the whole valley. Then they split up over one thing or another. Jim Henderson sunk a lot of money into a gold mine scheme that petered out. Mining engineer put him up to it. So then there was a drouth. The bank wouldn't lend Henderson any money and he had to go to Stryker. Looks like Stryker's goin' to get the Lazy H."

SOMETHING that might have been humor flickered in O'Neill's dark eyes. Jim Henderson and Vance Stryker fighting over something that didn't belong to either of them—which belonged in fact, to Tully O'Neill. Bought with his old man's money, wasn't it?

"Mebbe this Stryker hombre is doing the rustling," he suggested.

Strang's lips twisted into a sneer. "Yeah, we thought of that, so did the sheriff. Only thing is, the fence between Stryker's and the Lazy H ain't never been cut. His men is all accounted for and know we hit a widelooper at least once. We've had several skirmishes, but nary a sign of where our steers is goin'."

"Shucks," said one of the others. "There ain't no place for 'em to go! Unless they're hazed out in plain sight of Tujunga, which, if they are, shows they must fly, because they leave no tracks."

"They got to go that way! That's where the fence is always cut. Those cows are bein' driven into Mexico, but danged if I know how."

"Stryker, of course, has lost some cows, too?"

"Some," said Strang. "Not as many as us." Strang had turned surly all of a sudden. "Well, let's ride, fellas." They got up, straggled out.

Tully O'Neill watched them ride away. He felt restless, dissatisfied. The grub at the Lazy H hadn't tasted as good as he'd anticipated. Something was wrong somewhere, something inside himself. Blast that girl and her tantrums. Blast Henderson! Twenty years of hating and now this. O'Neill could do nothing but sit on his hands and wait.

On impulse he went out and saddled Goliath. He'd ride into Tujunga, that's what he'd do. He couldn't endure this lying around with the girl underfoot, and all. He could always come back, couldn't he? He swung into the saddle, headed for the bridge over the little creek. Marcy Henderson, on a blaze-faced roan, met him there.

"Leaving, Tully O'Neill?"

"Yes," he said in surly tones. "I don't like your grub. I'm riding into Tujunga."

She was laughing at him now. "Isn't that nice? We can keep each other company. You see, I'm going into Tujunga, too."

He kneed Goliath into a long lope. The roan loped alongside. He slowed to a walk, so did the roan. After a while they turned into the main trail, she keeping to her side, he to his, neither saying a word. Little clouds of dust, twins at first, lifted behind them, met and blended in the trail, seeming to form a sort of bond between girl and man.

By and by she said: "Your gun is a thirty-eight, isn't it. Funny. First thirty-eight we've seen for a long time."

"What's funny about it?" he demanded.

"My father," she said, "was shot by a thirty-eight. The sheriff has been looking for one ever since."

He glared at her. "Point out the sheriff's house and mebbe I'll give myself up."

She lifted her quirt. "The little house on the left," she said. "The one with the white fence around it." She halted while he anchored Goliath, watched him open the little white gate and stride up the walk. It wasn't till he'd actually gone inside that she rode on down to the express office.

Tully O'Neill regarded the little old lady before him. She was fat; rosy-cheeked and clear eyed. She looked as if she belonged in the little white house with the paling fence.

She smiled at him. "Come in, stranger, come right in and set yourself. The

sheriff, he's in takin' a bath. First one in a month, I do believe."

TULLY fiddled with his hat. She took it, put it on the table along with the family album and the china lamp. "Come on out in the kitchen, cowboy. I'll get you some coffee and a piece of apple-sauce cake. You look kind of lean and hungry."

He followed her diffidently, protesting that he wasn't a bit hungry. There was an unaccountable lump in his throat. Maybe it was the home atmosphere of the place, or the little old lady herself. Tully wondered if his mother had been like that. He didn't remember his mother very well.

She looked at him, birdlike. "You been sick," she accused. "You're brown enough, but it's all on the outside. You're kind of peaked underneath." Tully thought of Marcy Henderson. She had accused him of being a jail-bird.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "Seems like I've spent half of my life on the flat of my back. Either in some livery stable or the back room of a veterinary's office." He grinned at her. "You see, ma'am, you're nursin 'a viper to your bosom. They call me Slow-but-certain O'Neill. I'm supposed to be a killer."

He whirled instinctively at a heavy tread behind him. It was the sheriff. You could tell he was a sheriff even with his white hair all mussed up and his galluses hanging. He had a long walrus mustache, coal black, which went oddly with his white mane. Keen blue eyes twinkled at Tully O'Neill.

"Braggin', huh?" he asked good-naturedly.

"No, sir, just explainin'. Seems you're looking for a gunthrower who packs a thirty-eight. Thought you might hear about me." He took out his gun, extended it butt first. "I'm expectin' to be around Tujunga for a while."

The sheriff juggled the gun on a broad palm. "First one of these things I've seen in a month of Sundays." The keen eyes studied O'Neill. "You wouldn't be knowin' a party by the name of Jim Henderson, would you?"

Unconsciously Tully's eyes narrowed. His thin, mobile lips hardened. "Yes," he said, "I know Henderson. I been out to his ranch. But I haven't shot him yet. I probably will, though, when he's able to swing a six-shooter."

"Mebbe I better keep this here weapon then," Sheriff McGraw said. "Sort of postpone the evil day."

O'Neill didn't seem to move. It was unbelievable that he *had* moved, but one instant the gun was in the sheriff's hand, the next it was in Tully's, balanced easily, not pointing at anybody in particular.

"Sorry, Sheriff. Sorry Missus McGraw. I'm not meanin' to be ornery, but seems like it's important for me to pack a gun."

McGraw chuckled. "Doggone, son, you ain't slow but certain, you're greased lightning. Hope I don't ever have to go a-huntin' you. About Jim Henderson, now—what you got against him?"

"It's a kind of private matter, Sheriff," O'Neill told him. "Not meanin' to be disrespectful." He took up his hat, backed to the door. "That sure was swell cake, ma'am. Thank you kindly." Then he was outside. Strangely enough, the sheriff made no attempt to follow him.

He stood outside the little white gate, studying Tujunga's main street. It consisted of honkytonks, four or five saloons, the usual livery stable and a general merchandise store. It wasn't late and the Tujunga mercantile was still open.

Tully O'Neill walked Goliath down to the stable and left him there. After that he crossed the street diagonally, entered the store. He came out presently, went into the Silver Dollar. There were lots of men here and not all cowpunchers. There was a scattering of flannel-shirted miners.

O'NEILL pushed up to the bar, ordered a drink and stood there, not touching it. Dark eyes studied the noisy room from under his tugged-down hat brim. He caught the barkeep's eye again.

"Vance Stryker in town?" he asked quietly.

The fellow jerked a thumb. "In the back room," was the reply. "Who'll I say wants to see him?"

"Slow-but-certain O'Neill. Tell him it's kind of important."

The man went away and Tully O'Neill made rings on the bar with his whisky glass. Someone caught his arm, whirled him around. It was Red Strang, drunk as a boiled owl, glowering.

"I told you to stay away from Marcy Henderson. You didn't do it. You rode into town with her. Now, go for yore iron." Thick fingers dived, slapped leather. The two guns were almost clear before O'Neill even moved. Then, with a blur of motion, his .38 was buried in Strang's paunch. Strang's hands froze at his belt.

"Put 'em away, fella. I don't like your girl any better than I do you. Forget it and go soak your head. It needs it."

"A good idea, Strang," said a new voice. Tully looked at the man from the corner of his eye. A little man, very dark, almost foppish in his dress. From the tips of his black, highly polished boots to the crown of his pearl-white Stetson he was the typical range dandy, but he was old. His face was wizened, seamed in a thousand tiny wrinkles. Only the jet, shoe-button eyes and the pointed jet mustache were young. But there was power in the man. Tully O'Neill could see he was respected.

Strang holstered his guns, moved off, grumbling. The little man held out his hand.

"I'm Vance Stryker. You wanted to see me?"

O'Neill ignored the hand. "I'm needin' a place to hole up in for a while," he said. "Thought you could use an extra gun. They call me Slow-but-certain O'Neill."

Stryker blinked his bright little eyes. "I've heard of you," he said.

O'Neill looked at him. "Where?"

"Need we go into that?" Stryker seemed to make up his mind suddenly. "No, I won't be able to use you, O'Neill."

Tully grinned then, smiled deep into those probing eyes. He even yawned a little. "I think you'll use me, Stryker. I think you hate Jim Henderson as much as I do. I think I know where the missing cows have been going. You see, Stryker, you overlooked a little bet. I've been talking to the owner of the Tujunga Mercantile."

Stryker's eyes got very bright indeed, so bright that Tully could almost see the vision of murder reflected in them. But his small, womanish hands didn't even flicker toward his gun-belt.

"Very well, O'Neill," the gun-dandy said softly. "I'll be riding in half an hour. Meet you at the edge of town." He turned then, and went very quickly, very lightly down the long room. The polished heels of his small boots twinkled malice at Tully O'Neill.

CHAPTER III

Discovery

O'NEILL went out into the night, and down to the livery stable. Saddling Goliath, he saw Marcy Henderson and Red Strang ride by on their way out to the Lazy H. The giant's face looked sullen, morose; the girl's lighthearted, as if a weight had been removed from her mind. Tully grinned crookedly.

"A funny girl, Goliath. Too bad she didn't have a different father, huh?"

Goliath nodded as if he understood and approved his master's judgment. "Yep," said Tully O'Neill, "a funny girl." He rode out to the edge of town, kneed the stallion to a halt in the shadows of a clump of sycamores. After a while Vance Stryker joined him, and together, saying nothing, the tall young man and the smallish old man rode out along the dusty trail. There was no moon now. The Jacintos were blue-black against the curve of the sky.

"What did you mean back there, O'Neill," Stryker said presently, "about the Tujunga Mercantile?"

Tully chuckled quietly. "Because you been buying enough grub from the Tujunga Mercantile to feed eighteen-twenty waddies and you're only supposed to have five. You know," he went on lazily, "sometimes a man is careless about a thing because it is so close to his nose. Reckon that's what happened here. Bein' new, it occurred to me first thing about checkin' up on the grub."

"Go on, O'Neill." Stryker kept his voice level.

"Them poor vanishing cows, now," Tully went on. "Back where I come from it wasn't necessary to cut fence. Fact is, I've seen mighty near a mile of line fence laid right down flat, just by liftin' the fence posts out of the ground. Of course, it takes men, a lot of men—eighteen to twenty cowhands. Takes men to lay a false trail, too, and to cut fence and bushwhack Jim Henderson's riders while others is hazin' the herd onto your range. But after that it's no trick at all to set up the fence and haze your own cows in behind Henderson's. It's a clear drag into Mexico from your other line, huh?"

Stryker leaned a little in the saddle. Something gleamed in his hand. "All right, O'Neill, you're covered. Don't move." He was smiling now, very sure of himself. "I just wanted to see how much you knew, O'Neill, and to keep you from telling others." He reined in closer, the gun in plain sight now and very steady. Jet eyes smiled into those of O'Neill. "You're through snooping, O'Neill."

Tully smiled a little, too, as his hands lifted. Stryker's eyes lifted with the hands. Just for a split second, but it was enough. Tully's boot cleared the stirrup, kicked up. Stryker's gun went sailing away and Stryker himself sat nursing a numbed fist. His eyes were venomous.

"You see," said O'Neill conversationally, "I got my name, Slow-but-certain, when I was just learnin'. I've improved a little with age—and practise. Do we ride on, pardner?"

Stryker looked at him curiously. "What's your game, O'Neill? What do you want?"

"Mebbe," said Tully, "I want half of whatever you're plannin' to get by takin' over the Lazy H. Seemed kind of funny to me, you stealin' Henderson blind so he couldn't pay off his notes to you. Figgered you must want his spread. And you do, too. Seems he had him a mining engineer who didn't turn up anything. The storekeeper tells me you picked up this mining hombre after Henderson let him go; kind of cultivated him, kept him in liquor and one thing and another till he finally departed this earth.

"Seemed like that was right generous of a party by the name of Vance Stryker. I got to wondering if mebbe the fella didn't uncover something worth while and sell out to you."

STRYKER'S calm deserted him. He cursed savagely. Then he said, "O'Neill, you're a devil! Not another soul has ever guessed."

"Except Red Strang, huh?"

"What do you mean? Strang is rodding the Lazy H!"

"And working for you on the side. Back there in the Silver Dollar you said you'd heard of me. You couldn't hear of me from anybody but Strang. I saw him come out of the back room just before you did."

"You win," said Stryker, and again he was in complete control of himself. "I'll cut you in for half, O'Neill, but you've got to earn part of it. I want Jim Henderson killed."

"Sure," said Tully. "Fact is, that's the only reason I came to California for in the first place." He dismounted, recovered the fallen gun, tucked it in his belt and grinned. "I'll keep this just in case you go getting any more ideas."

They rode on to the Bar S. It was late when they got in, no lights showing in the bunkhouse. Unsaddling, they turned their animals into the corral. Stryker led the way to the ranchhouse.

"Drink?" he invited.

"Nope," said Tully, yawning. "Think I'll hit the hay." He followed his dapper little host into a bedroom, said good night after a casual look around. Stry-

ker went away. There was no key in the door. The cowboy propped a chair under the knob, turned out the lights and took off his boots. He stretched out on the bed without undressing.

O'Neill didn't mean to go to sleep, but he did. The creaking of the chair aroused him. The doorknob was being turned very stealthily. He grinned a little there in the darkness, got out his papers and rolled a cigarette. Presently ghostly footsteps went away from the door. Tully got up, unhooked the window screen. He was just lighting his cigarette when Stryker rounded the house.

"Tough, stayin' up all night, ain't it?" Stryker halted. "I—I thought I heard someone."

"You will," Tully chuckled. "You sure will, pardner, if you don't quit messin' round. Good night, Stryker." Stryker left hurriedly, and Tully hooked the screen and pulled down the shade, but he didn't go back to bed. Instead, he splashed water into the wash bowl, tested it with a finger, shivered, plunged his face in.

After that he sat in a plush platform rocker and rocked and tried to concentrate on what he was going to do to old Jim Henderson. It was kind of hard because a girl's face kept getting in the way. A blue-eyed girl, with kind of golden hair, and a disposition like the wind. Tully O'Neill didn't know much about girls, but she hated him, he could see that. She'd hate him more when he'd done what he'd set out to do.

Dawn was silvering the sky when O'Neill finally got up and went out to the kitchen. A one-legged cook looked at him without interest and bobbed his head when Stryker came in. Stryker and O'Neill ate in silence, friendly enough on the surface, but watchful, expectant. Stryker had got another gun somewhere, so O'Neill stayed behind him and a little to the right as they went down to the corrals. He was introduced to the men.

There was nothing suspicious in sight, and the men looked like ordinary hands. They saddled, rode off in ordinary fashion.

"Well, O'Neill?" Stryker asked.

"Think I'll ride a while," said Tully. "Kind of look around. Unless you've got something on your mind?" He saddled Goliath without ever turning his back for an instant.

Stryker smiled at him. "Afraid, O'Neill? You needn't be." He lifted a hand as O'Neill chuckled. "Oh, I admit I'd have got you last night if I could. But that's all done with now. I've been thinking things over and decided you were cheap, even at half. We can do things together, O'Neill, that I couldn't without you." He scowled suddenly. "Watch yoreself, O'Neill. Here comes Sheriff McGraw and, from the way he's riding, it looks like trouble."

THEY watched horse and rider grow larger till even the sheriff's flowing black mustaches were visible in the half light of early dawn. O'Neill sat easily, relaxed in the saddle. Stryker, on foot, rubbed Goliath's muzzle.

McGraw pounded up, yanked his mount back on its haunches and in the same motion yanked his gun. "You're under arrest, Tully O'Neill!"

"For what?"

"For the murder of Jim Henderson!" Tully looked blank. McGraw scowled ferociously. "Look innocent all you want, son. I admit you kind of took me in last night. But this time it's murder and robbery."

"Robbery?" said Stryker. "I didn't know Henderson had anything else to lose."

"He got seven thousand dollars last night. Friend of his sent it down by express from Reno. He was all set to pay you off Stryker, and a blamed good thing, too, and somebody shot him."

"With a thirty-eight," said O'Neill. It was almost a statement of fact. It would have to be a thirty-eight. And Jim Henderson was dead. Beyond Tully's reach for good now. He wondered dully how it felt to be hanged. It couldn't feel much worse than he felt anyhow. It had taken him twenty years to find Henderson, and now somebody had cheated him out of his vengeance.

He lifted dark eyes to the sheriff.

"Let's go, McGraw," he said, his voice thick with anger.

McGraw sidled his mount in close, snaked the gun from Tully's leg. Then Stryker moved. He was beyond Goliath for just an instant out of sight of the sheriff. His right hand went up, and came down in a slashing blow across the stallion's nose. Goliath leaped straight up, came down twenty feet away and flattened out in a long reaching gallop that Tully couldn't stop.

There was a shot and Tully's hat went skittering off to the left. He sawed on the bit, trying to stop the frantic stallion. Another shot lifted him out of the saddle, flung him forward on the animal's neck. He tried to straighten, couldn't. Then a third shot seemed to split his head wide open. The red ball which was the sun exploded and Tully O'Neill went down.

CHAPTER IV

Range Justice

A TERRIBLE headache raged in his head when O'Neill opened his eyes, stared at a wall that had little pink butterflies on it. He didn't remember ever seeing that kind of a wall in a livery stable before, nor in a veterinary's back room. Otherwise, the sensations were about the same. No, not quite. He was in a bed, he decided, as his fingers felt the white counterpane with a sort of mild wonder that anybody should have bothered to put him to bed.

"He's come to!" someone said quietly.

Tully turned his head a little. It hurt, and the room did crazy things before his eyes, but he could see the sheriff and Mrs. McGraw and Marcy Henderson.

Marcy looked very small and she had been crying. Tully vaguely wondered why. And then he remembered.

McGraw got up stiffly and stood over the bed. "Look, son, what's done is done. Jim Henderson's dead and mebbe you figgered he had reason to be. I don't know. You'll probably hang, either legally or if the townsfolk get hold of you. They're pretty riled up. But look, son, you ain't goin' to need money where you're goin'. No sense to makin' it harder for Marcy than it is anyway. Where's the rest of the money?"

"The rest of what money?"

"Of the seven thousand you took away from Jim Henderson. We only found a thousand in your money-belt."

Tully grinned, even though it hurt like the devil. Something else was hurting him, too. Maybe it was the look in Marcy's eyes. They were sad, but not angry. And maybe it was the thought that they took him for a thief.

"You wouldn't believe it, McGraw," he said, "but I won that thousand playin' stud back in Vegas. I didn't kill Henderson; I don't know where the seven thousand is. But if Marcy needs the thousand she's welcome to it."

He turned his head away. They didn't believe him. Something moved outside the little window with the bars across it. Red Strang. There was a look of nervousness about him, a sort of wild impatience.

It was almost dark outside and Tully O'Neill had an idea Strang was only waiting for darkness, and for him to be left alone. Well, that might be better than hanging. Maybe, if somebody tried to stop Tully O'Neill's mouth it would kind of wake the sheriff up.

Mrs. McGraw came over, tilted a bottle of medicine into a spoon, lifted the cowboy's head. "Time to go to sleep again." There was no accusation in her voice, only kindness. The lump in Tully's throat got bigger, but he swallowed the medicine docilely. Presently they went away, and Tully forgot about them, and the man lurking outside the little window. In a short while he was asleep.

Hours later he woke up. There was a lamp burning in a wall bracket, but the window shade was pulled down tight. Mrs. McGraw dozed in the rocking

chair. These were the two reasons why Tully O'Neill was still alive. He almost felt sorry for Red Strang and Vance Stryker being cheated that way. He lifted his head carefully, found he wasn't so dizzy and tried sitting up, but he sank back with a stifled groan.

MRS. McGRAW'S eyes popped open. She leaned over, put a plump, cool hand on his head. "Hungry, cowboy?"

"Not very," he said. He looked at the bottle of medicine on the stand. "Mebbe I could stand a cup of coffee."

"And some applesauce cake?" She got up, sat down again and fixed him with a birdlike eye. "You been talkin', sonny, talkin' in your sleep. I can kind of understand a lot of things that were Greek to me before."

"Yeah?"

"Yep," she said, very pleased with herself. "I know why you came to Tujunga, and what it was that Jim Henderson did to your father. Your dad caught his pardner looting the bank, tried to stop him and got shot for his pains. Folks kind of thought your dad was in on the job, eh?"

Tully O'Neill didn't say anything. He knew it all by heart, having thought of nothing else for twenty years. Selling the ranch, selling everything he owned hadn't helped his old man much. They had still wanted to hang him. It was a miscarriage of justice, they said, when he only got ten years in prison.

The seven-year-old boy and his mother had been shunned by all, scapegoats for the missing Jim Henderson. Finally, the mother had died under it, but Tully had lived. He had survived somehow to meet the old man when he came out. And now the old man was dead. And Henderson was dead, and Tully soon would be. Funny, huh?

"Marcy?" he asked, because he had to say something. "Is she all right?"

The old lady smiled knowingly. "You kind of like her, don't you?"

"Sure," he said bitterly. "I'm crazy about her. That's why I shot her old man in his bed. He was in bed, wasn't he?"

She stopped smiling. "Yes, he was in bed, and crippled. That's why folks are kind of riled against you. He must have waked up and recognized you, eh? When you was after the money?"

"More than likely," said Tully O'Neill wearily. "What difference does it make? Can I have that coffee now, ma'am?"

She got up, went out. Presently she was back with a pot of coffee and two cups.

"Believe I'll have a cup with you. Somehow I can hardly keep my eyes open." She poured.

"Mind shadin' that lamp a little, ma'am? Kind of hurts my eyes." She turned her back, and Tully, feeling like a dog in the manger, emptied the little bottle into her coffee. After that he watched her while the rocker creaked and creaked, and her old head bobbed, lower and lower, till finally the rocker ceased moving altogether and the head was still.

O'Neill got up then, giddy and weak as a kitten. Red-hot irons pierced his chest and the wound in his head felt like it was bleeding again. Steadying himself against the walls as he went, he searched for his clothes, found them finally, all washed and ironed, and he felt more like a yellow dog than ever. She'd done all that for him, yes, and treated him decent in other ways, too, and he'd tricked her. But he had to get Stryker, didn't he? No one else was doing it. And there was the red-headed giant, Strang. He dressed and put his hat on over the tight bandage around his head.

He wobbled through the little passage into the jail office, found his gun and belt. Nobody was around, though the clock on the wall said it was only a little after eleven. Up the street, there were lights, and men, but down at this end it was quiet.

O'NEILL let himself out through the back way, clung to the shadows till he was opposite the livery stable. Then, quickly, though it was hard to make his feet move, he crossed the street.

The livery man loomed out of the darkness. "Hold it, pardner!" Tully said

quietly, and the man cursed savagely.

"Saddle my bronc," said Tully curtly. The gun in his hand lent weight to the command. He propped himself against the door, dizzy, nauseated, while the man obeyed. It took almost the last bit of his strength to mount. The man sensed the weakness, and lunged.

Tully had to hit him. He brought the gun down as hard as he could and the man sagged. Then Goliath was away like the wind, carrying a man who could scarcely see, and who clutched the horn for support like a tenderfoot. He was bleeding badly, but when they came to the Bar S, his head was clearer, and his hand seemed steady enough.

There were no lights in the bunkhouse. One in the office of the main building silhouetted a shadow against the drawn shade.

O'Neill kneed Goliath to a walk, rounded the house silently. In the kitchen he paused for a dipper of water. Fever was burning him up. Snores came to him, muffled by a closed door. The one-legged cook, probably, Tully thought. There was a crack of light under the other door, no sound. He felt his way toward it, very careful now, then quickly flung the door open.

Vance Stryker faced him smiling. There was a gun in his hand. "Well, well, we meet again, O'Neill! I heard you were still alive. The sheriff's carbine must be losing its power."

"It wasn't the sheriff," said O'Neill with sudden intuition. "You hit Goliath so it would look like I was running away. The sheriff used his forty-five, but you shot me."

"Smart," said Stryker. "I grabbed his carbine and in the interest of—ah—justice, let you have it. Now I am going to be forced to shoot an escaped prisoner." His gun steadied. The knuckle of his trigger-finger whitened.

O'Neill dropped as the gun flamed, and fired from the floor. Stryker's gun flew out of his hand. Even as the echoes rocked the room there was a cursing, the thump of a peg leg from the lean-to beyond the kitchen. Stryker was cursing too, trying to shake the numbness out of his hand. O'Neill got up, kicked the fallen weapon far under the table.

"All right, Stryker," O'Neill blazed out the order. "Get me the money *and* the mortgage. And tell yore crow-hopping friend to mind his own business!"

Stryker took one look at O'Neill's eyes, lifted his voice. "Never mind, Joe, go back to bed." A sly grin twisted his lips as he turned to the desk.

Tully took a step forward, rammed his gun into the man's back. "Better tell Joe to go down and quiet the rest of the boys, too. They are getting restless."

Stryker called out obediently and the man clumped out of the kitchen door. They could hear him going around the house, muttering as he went. Stryker sank into the desk chair, fumbled in a drawer. Suddenly he whirled. He had another gun now, and triumph lit his shoe-button eyes. He squeezed trigger. The slug scraped O'Neill's thigh. The next one went wild. It missed because Stryker couldn't see any more. O'Neill's slug had entered his grinning mouth, and slammed his sleek head back, now a bloody mess, against the desk.

QUICKLY then, because there was need for haste, O'Neill ransacked drawers and pigeon-holes till he found what he sought. Pounding feet were coming on the run from the bunkhouse. But O'Neill faded out through the kitchen just as the front door was flung open.

He thought he was safe for the moment. Then a man loomed out of the shadows and the gun in his hand roared. The bullet missed O'Neill's head by inches. He returned the fire and his aim was good. The man dropped, landing on his back to sprawl there motionless.

"There he is!" came a shout.

Men appeared around the corner of the house. O'Neill turned to face them, menacing them with the guns in his hands.

"Get back," he snapped, "or I'll down the whole bunch of you!"

He was outnumbered five to one and they knew they could get him, but they also realized some of them would die beneath those guns when they started

blazing and they were reluctant to fire the first shot that would start the battle raging.

They stood motionless, watching as O'Neill backed toward his horse. He reached the black, then fired two shots over the heads of the men that sent them seeking a safer spot. He found that the gash in his leg was bleeding badly as he pulled himself into the saddle of the big black. Then Goliath carried him, reeling drunkenly in the saddle, past running men and slashing gunfire till he was out in the open.

O'Neill pushed himself erect, doggedly, and reined Goliath around in a wide turn and they were headed for the Lazy H. The pounding of the stallion's hoofs was echoed by the pounding and roaring in Tully's head. Blood crept down from under the tight-wrapped bandage beneath his hat—blood and the sweat of agonized, outraged flesh. Blood soaked his jeans, and still he rode.

After a while a barrier loomed ahead. It was the line fence between the Bar S and the Lazy H, the fence that had never been cut. Tully O'Neill lifted the stallion in a magnificent jump. They cleared the fence by a foot, but the black came down heavily, stiff legged. The jar finished Tully O'Neill. He didn't know how or when he reached the Lazy H, neither did he know that Marcy and the old Chinese cook dragged him free of the saddle, carried him into the kitchen.

It wasn't till Strang came in that he opened his eyes. The sound of Strang's voice was like a giant gong, rousing him. He lifted his head, looked into Marcy's eyes. And then, fumbling, he patted his shirt.

"In—in here, Marcy, the money! Everything's there—the seven thousand *and* the mortgage, got 'em both. Figgered Stryker wouldn't need 'em any more, bein' dead." He grinned up at the towering Strang. "And you, Red, I got a little present for you, too." His hand crept along his side and found the thirty-eight.

Strang cursed, sprang back, slapping leather. The two shots came as one, but Strang missed and Tully didn't. Strang's bullet buried itself in the floor. Tully's found the giant's arm.

Even as the gun dropped, Strang's other hand was streaking for his shirt. It came out with a gun, leveled. The flash of O'Neill's own iron almost blinded him, but when the smoke cleared, he was satisfied. Both of Strang's arms hung limp at his sides. Blood dripped from O'Neill's fingers and he looked down at his hands, dazed, wonderingly.

Marcy screamed then, and Tully O'Neill's gun slipped from his fingers as his head fell backward.

WHEN he opened his eyes again he was still on the floor, but somebody had put a mattress under him, and his dark head was pillowed on Marcy's shoulder. The Chinese cook was pottering around the stove, mumbling cheerfully to himself. Red Strang, propped in a sitting position against the wall, was speaking.

His voice sounded small compared to his usual bellow, and the freckles on his broad face stood out plainly against the pallor. "I was doin' it so I could get you, Marcy. You'd never look at me. I figgered mebbe if I had money—and you didn't—" His voice dwindled away at the scorn in her eyes.

"You murdered my father! You're the one that shot him before. Oh, I see it all now. That gun you've kept so carefully hidden, it's a thirty-eight."

He nodded solemnly, earnestly. "I done all you said, Marcy. Stryker was goin' to make me rich, but I never meant to kill the old man. He woke up, recognized me there in his room. I—well, I had to kill him, then, didn't I?"

There was something almost pitiful about this fallen giant. He looked at O'Neill as the cook brought hot water and they began stripping off the bandages. "I'm kind of sorry, O'Neill. It—it seemed all right, the way Stryker told it. And you showin' up with a thirty-eight and all—" The bulging eyes closed suddenly, and the ramrod crumpled over on his side.

Marcy's eyes, questioning, begging

forgiveness, sought Tully's.

"I'm so ashamed, Tully O'Neill," she said so quietly that O'Neill could barely hear the words. He grinned up at her. "Forget it," he said.

And then there was the swift beat of hoofs outside, the trampling of heavy feet on the veranda. In stamped Sheriff McGraw, walrus mustaches bristling fiercely. His eyes took in the red-headed giant, the two guns, came back to rest on O'Neill and Marcy. He scowled.

"Funny thing, O'Neill. When I got back and found you gone I figgered you'd be headin' for Stryker's. So a few of the boys and I fanned the breeze out there, and what do you think? We ran plumb smack into Mexican Louie and a bunch of his men."

"You don't say! And then what?"

"Why, we had a little powwow. Finally ends up with Louie tellin' me all about how he was workin' under cover for Stryker and Strang."

"Can you imagine that!" said Tully O'Neill, his eyes wide in mock astonishment. "Well, mebbe when you bring Strang around he can add a little to your present knowledge. Seems like there's a gold mine somewhere on the Lazy H. I don't know where, but probably he does."

He got slowly to his hands and knees, then to his feet. The floor acted kind of funny, sort of wavy, but he guessed he could make it to the door, all right. He must make it out to good old Goliath. He was almost at the door when Marcy stopped him.

"Tully O'Neill, where do you think you're going?" she asked impatiently. "You—you can't leave here like that. You're wounded and all—all covered with blood!"

"Got to look for a livery stable," he mumbled, "or a vet's office."

Something wet dropped on his hand and he looked down at it wonderingly. A tear? He looked at Marcy. He couldn't see her very well, because things were getting kind of hazy again, but she sounded like she was crying. Funny girl, Marcy. One minute bossing you, the next minute crying.

"Got to be goin'," he said, and turned toward the door once more.

"But Tully!" Small, brown fists clutched his shirt, holding him up. "Tully O'Neill, I need you!"

"Huh?" he said. "Need me? Why that's kind of funny, Marcy. Nobody ever needed me before."

"Tully O'Neill, you're a fool! A stubborn, lovable fool. I need you, I tell you. Need you and—and love you, do you hear?"

"In that case," he said, "in that case, Marcy, I reckon I'll lie down a while."

SUMMER RANGE

(Concluded from page 91)

saying, "We got there just after the fight was over, Burnhoff. We took one prisoner and got the story from him. The Lomax brothers were at the bottom of it. Exactly what happened, we don't know, but as we figure it out, Chan took care of Sid and Curly before the others arrived. He's a lot of man."

"How is he?" asked Chan's uncle.

"I have the doc here from Tiburon. He says that Chan's got better than an even chance. I think he'll make it."

"He'd better," said Burnhoff. "I need him."

Chan heard the words, but it was the new warm and respectful note in his uncle's usually gruff voice that made him feel suddenly better.

"I will make it," he said aloud. Or perhaps he just said that to himself, for the voices of the other two continued.

"It was the gun that made me think something might be wrong," Randolph was saying. "Chan said the firing pin had been broken. To me it looked filed. On the chance someone might have fooled with it and Chan might be in trouble, some of us rode over here."

"It's lucky you did," said Burnhoff.

The voice droned on but Chan didn't listen any longer. He was still alive. He was going to get well. And he had a job. What more could a man ask for.

(Continued from page 6)

across the mountain tops beyond which lay his goal. As he was coming down the mountains not far from his destination he was suddenly confronted by a precipice too steep to descend and all but impossible to skirt. The dogs so pressed and worried the turkeys, trying to force them to make the descent, that they finally became desperate and took to the air.

Flying Turkeys

As Hooker saw all his turkeys take wing, he felt that he was saying goodbye to them, and also to all his dreams of the future. His finances were at their lowest ebb and these turkeys were his whole earthly possession. Now they were flying away, and with them were flying all his hopes. His thoughts must have been of his wife and children and their future as he raced madly to skirt the precipice and descend to the valley below in the hope of retrieving some of the flying birds.

But the situation was not as bad as it seemed. In the valley below Hooker, his helper and his dogs succeeded in rounding up the aerial squadron, which somewhat weary of wing were content to again be driven on foot, and they were easy to steer once more toward Carson City. The turkeys brought five dollars apiece, so by this seemingly crazy stunt Hooker had recouped a part of his fortunes, and with the profit that he realized from the sale of his turkeys he laid the foundations of his Arizona fortune and his fame as a stockman.

Soon after the turkey episode he went to Arizona as a partner of Hugh Hinds, who had secured a government contract to furnish supplies to the Army posts and Indian Agencies of Arizona.

From 1860 to 1870, under Hooker's management, the whole military organization of Arizona was supplied with beef. He also took charge of the beef contracts of James G. Barney and William B. Hooper, two other big operators. During 1872 he furnished the Government more than fifteen thousand head of cattle. He bought his cattle in Texas and Mexico and drove them in herds of about four thousand at a time. This was no easy task, it took men of iron nerve, of stamina and determination to make such drives, and the dangers from stampede, Indians and rustlers were always in evidence. Men driving such herds of cattle had to be alert and ready for most any emergency.

Frontier Meat Broker

Hooker's work was always dangerous. Before starting a drive he had to travel from post to post by buckboard in order to find out beforehand what supplies were wanted at the various forts and agencies, and in what amounts. His only companion on these dangerous trips was a Mexican servant who made camp for him and cared for his team. There was constant danger from Indian ambush, and it was the day when the Indians were armed with poisoned arrows and spears. While Hooker usually drove the team the servant rode with his face to the rear, armed and in readiness to give battle to any attackers.

Often camp was made along a river or creek. Wild game was abundant, but the slightest rustling of brush always caused alarm as they were constantly in fear of ambush. Many of Hooker's men were killed by Indians during these early contracting days, and the only reason he did not meet a similar fate, was that the Indians must have considered him their friend and provider, as they had many opportunities to surprise and murder him, but they seemed to know him and spare his life.

Once he was driving his four-mule Concord ambulance on a trip from the San Pedro River eastward. When he reached Dragoon Pass, near Cochise Stronghold he noticed that many Indians were closing in about him. In order to give the impression that he was not alarmed he turned his team and drove right in among them—which brought him up at Cochise's camp. The Indians took care of his teams, the squaws cooked food for him and his attendant and made them beds of brush. He was too alarmed to enjoy either food or sleep; but in the morning his team was brought to him, and he went on his way without loss or hurt. Before leaving the camp however Cochise had assured him that he knew him and could have taken him many times; but as he brought cattle into the country, the great Indian warrior did not want to have him killed.

Locating a Pioneer Home

One night in 1872 Hooker was encamped

at a watering place called Oak Grove in the Galiuro Mountains with a herd of cattle that was left over after he had filled the Government contracts. During the night the herd stampeded. The vaqueros following the trail of the cattle found them at a spring in the Sulphur Spring Valley. This location appealed to Colonel Hooker so strongly that he homesteaded it; built the fine Sierra Bonita hacienda and later brought his family to live there.

In those days the whole region was Government land, so the territory over which his cattle roamed was almost boundless. When asked what his acreage was, he would usually reply: "Ten Miles square and all lands adjoining." By location, purchase, or prior occupation, he actually controlled a range thirty miles long and about twenty-seven miles wide.

Soon after locating his ranch in Sulphur Spring Valley and stocking it with some eleven thousand longhorn cattle, which were the prevailing breed of those days, he started in to improve the breed of his herds. He was one of the first Arizona ranchers to go in for extensive breeding of Short-horns and later Herefords.

By 1884 Colonel Hooker's holdings were lordly in extent. It would take a person on horseback four days at a rate of forty-five miles per day to ride the boundary line of his estate of more than a million and a quarter acres. Thus he went on to be one of the wealthiest ranchers in all of Arizona, a man admired for his square dealing, and for the hospitality of his home, as he was a great entertainer. By hard work and close application to the business he carved a name for himself as one of the Territory's greatest pioneer ranchers, and it all started from his so-called crazy idea of driving turkeys to market.

Pete Kitchen of Arizona

The story of Henry C. Hooker, brought out the story of another pioneer rancher of Arizona, Pete Kitchen, and he was as different from Hooker as night is from day. He was a rough charcoal sketch of civilized man. He came to Arizona in 1854, and farmed rich broad acres on Potrero Creek near its junction with the Santa Cruz. He was a rifleman par excellence and during the bloodiest days of Indian warfare his name was a household word among the white settlers. To the wild Apache he was "more terrible than an army with banners." His hacienda situated on the summit of a rocky hillock overlooking the valley in every direction, was as much a fort as a ranch house.

For a big part of three decades, from 1860 well into the 1880s the Apaches held a flaming sword over the frontier that was Arizona. It was the scene of open warfare, forcing the administration in Washington to send armed forces for the protection of settlers. The Government and the country were not in the best of shape having gone through a costly civil war. The Apache wars were long and expensive, the nimble Apaches ran the Army ragged. They had shrewd leadership, they knew the country, and they traveled fast and furiously through it.

The Apache campaign was practically perfect from the viewpoint of military science and tactics. Without artillery support they never allowed themselves to be drawn into a full scale battle. They deployed their forces in small, swift groups that constantly harassed larger and better-organized foemen and could strike with terror and surprise at small and less vigilant detachments sent against them.

There were two descriptions of the Apaches. One was that they were noble warriors fighting to protect their happy hunting grounds against the tide of white man's civilization; the other that they were cruel, blood-thirsty savages bent upon despoiling the fair land. Either or both of the descriptions were not far wrong. On occasions the Apache could really do a noble deed, and upon others he could be as cruel as human beings have ever been known to be. While the Apaches have been called most everything, they have never been called cowards. Yet on their raids through the valley in the vicinity of the Pete Kitchen ranch the Apaches passed by it both coming and going, still they just did not seem to have what it took to fight Pete Kitchen and drive him from the country as they had so many other white ranchers and settlers.

Kitchen was almost the last settler to hang on after the withdrawal of the troops in 1861. His ranch was considered the safest point between Tucson and Magdalena, Sonora, and during the darkest days of the Apache warfare, miners, settlers, and travelers made it a sort of rallying point.

Kitchen's Ranch House Fort

The flat roof of Kitchen's adobe ranch house was surrounded by a parapet three or four feet high, and a sentinel was con-

stantly posted there to sound the alarm in case of an attack. In event of a sudden attack, the guard would discharge his gun as a signal to the Indian and Mexican workmen in the nearby fields below the ranch house. The men would instantly run for the house, while Pete, or his wife, Dona Rosa, would gather up the guns from the corners and wall-racks and lay them out ready for use. Dona Rosa would fight right along with the men and was also as expert with a rifle.

The Apaches made many raids upon Kitchen's ranch house. They shot his pigs full of arrows, they killed or drove out his bravest neighbors. They murdered his herder and slaughtered his stepson, but Pete Kitchen fought on undaunted. He fought so hard and caused so many Apache casualties that his name struck terror to the stoutest-hearted Indians, and at last finding that he was too tough a nut to crack, they passed him by.

Pete Kitchen seemed to be able to feel, or in some manner foretell, when an attack

[*Turn page*]

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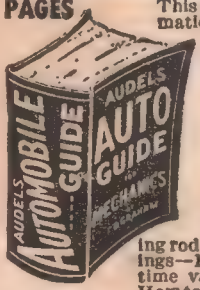

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was about to occur. One night he felt that all was not well, so taking his Mexican wife, Dona Rose, to the dugout on the edge of the rocky hill just below the ranch house, he set himself to keep sharp watch. In the course of the watch he detected a slight movement down the hill. He fired. There was a terrible yell in reply. Then all was quiet as he continued his watch through the night. The next morning in the field below he found a shallow grave, and in that grave the body of an Indian he had shot.

Kitchen's Battle Strategy

The Indians had crept upon him as stealthily as possible in the night. They thought that they would surprise him, but were themselves surprised, and one of their number killed in darkness that even their own sharp eyes could not penetrate. No wonder the Apaches thought that Pete Kitchen was bad medicine and decided to by-pass his ranch house and leave him to himself.

Perhaps the strategy employed by Kitchen in going and coming from his ranch, as he must at intervals, and still keep from falling before the arrows of the Apaches, would do credit to a great general. Once on one of his trips, a highwayman hid in the brush and attempted to rob Kitchen, but Kitchen was too fast for him and as the robber leaped out of the brush and yelled "Throw up your hands"—he found that he was already covered by Kitchen's gun. The old rancher made the robber shell out what money he had, which was only a small amount. Kitchen let the robber keep his money, gave him an extra quarter and told him to get out of the country.

The story of these two pioneer ranchers just goes to show that men of different types, of different dispositions and even

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of different characters made up the great horde of hardy pioneers who helped in the winning of the West to civilization. They lived, they died, and the progress they had helped to start rolled on, but with their passing they left a rich heritage for thousands who followed, and the tales of their deeds and adventures will live on and on. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THERE were towns in the West whose names hold a special meaning—where history was written to the accompaniment of gun thunder and where the great figures of the old days stalked across the stage like giants.

Such a town was Tombstone, and Dodge City and Cheyenne. And such a one was Deadwood, South Dakota.

You can find Deadwood on almost any map, for though it is a small place now, that part of South Dakota is still sparsely settled and towns are few. You'll find it in the Black Hills and if you remember your history, you'll recall that the Black Hills were sacred to the Sioux Indians. The American government signed a solemn and sacred treaty with the Sioux, promising to respect the sanctity of this holy region and that it would remain the untouched property of the Sioux tribes forever.

Forever. . . . Sometimes that's a short time. A prospector discovered gold in the Black Hills. And instantly the stampede was on. Thousands of gold-crazy diggers poured into the territory. The Sioux protested angrily. The U. S. Army tried to keep the miners out. It was like bailing out the ocean with a teaspoon. And so at last the Government did what it always did in parallel cases—it tore up the treaty and threw open the Black Hills to emigrants.

The result was Deadwood, a hell-roaring town of miners, gamblers, freighters, outlaws and toughs from every part of the country. Here such figures as Bat Masterson, Calamity Jane and Wild Bill Hickok made their appearance and it was here in Deadwood that Wild Bill Hickok was shot and killed by Jack McCall (DEVILS OF DEADWOOD by Walker A. Tompkins, RIO KID WESTERN for April, 1950).

The Rio Kid knew Deadwood. And he was to play a return engagement there in

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a new partnership with Bat Masterson and Calamity Jane, as well as his old saddlemate, Celestino Mireles. You'll read all about it in the new Rio Kid novel scheduled for our next issue: RAIDERS OF DEADWOOD, by Tom Curry.

The Rio Kid was engaged on a peaceful freighting mission and had no idea of any rough stuff until he ran across the wrecked and burning steamer *Dakota*. The boat had been plundered by river outlaws, an Army paymaster killed and a sizable chunk of Uncle Sam's money taken. Furthermore, Pryor had a very good idea of the identity of the killers, though he had yet to get any real proof. But this was the very sort of thing that was a challenge to the young veteran of the lawless West. And sided by his old time pard, Mireles, plus Bat Masterson and Calamity Jane—a dead shot with the rifle—he was just in the mood to tangle with as murderous and deadly a crew of river rats as ever cut a throat or shot a man in the back.

A Roaring Saga

RAIDERS OF DEADWOOD brings you a new and exciting picture of the turbulent town which added its roaring saga to the story of the West. And this new Rio Kid adventure is packed with thrills and excitement plus some new and interesting real life characters from the old West—such characters as Madame Mustache, the lady gambler who could have joined any circus as the "bearded lady."

Also featured in this same issue is a new Chick Bowdrie story, RAIN ON THE MOUNTAIN FORK by Louis L'Amour. This is the story of a lawman's dilemma when Ranger Chick Bowdrie finds himself in a roomful of men—one of whom is a killer. Problem: which is his man and how does he pick him out? A tense, gripping story with an exciting finish. L'Amour packs power in every word.

There'll be other novelets and shorts too, for we've crowded a heap of reading matter between the covers to make up a solidly plump magazine that will give you many an evening of pleasure as you journey back to the old days when men were men and the West was wild.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We've had some slam-bang correspondence the last few issues, with that very pretty gal Lutjens jumping all over our poor friend Derwent because he beefed about women in the stories. And Glendolyn Rees coming to help Lutjens. We had a feeling this was going to start some more fireworks and it sure did. Here is some of it on the man's side:

Can a story be written or a picture drawn without some doggoned woman in it? Women make me sick. When an exciting scene is coming up, what happens? Some goggle-eyed, mushy lovers pop up. If you're going to print a Western book, leave out the undefinable women. However, if you keep them in you could change the title to REAL WESTERN HE-MAN ROMANCES. I'm not going to buy another one of your books if there's any mushy, sickening love scenes in the next issue. I agree with Mr. Derwent 100% in everything he said. And it's women like W. D. Lutjens who give me a laugh, thinking they can do anything a man can do—only better. If Lutjens had taken a man's place in the army, the war would have been over on December 9, 1941. Women make me sick. I pity Lutjen's husband.

—*Harry David Gondy, Sumter, S. C.*

Sounds a little worked up about it, doesn't he? If you'd seen Lutjen's picture, Harry, you wouldn't be feeling so sorry for her husband.

Sorry we couldn't print it on this paper, but she sure was cute.

Anyway you get the idea. We've got women haters in our midst and some gals who can fight back. I shudder to think of what Lutjens is going to say in answer when she spots Harry's letter. Want to leave town, Harry?

We'll see if you can get a nice cave to hide in.

I'd like to say a word for Joseph Chadwick's story RED TRAIL OF NO RETURN, in the September issue. This was not only the best Rio Kid novel you have ever published, but it was a wonderful story in every respect. It

made the Indians real live people instead of painted devils, it showed they have problems and joys and griefs like everyone else and it showed their marvelous courage and stamina under awful conditions. At the same time this was an exciting story, full of action, with no dull spots. In fact, it was so good I'm scared Chadwick won't be able to repeat.

—Gil Patterson, Denver, Colorado.

The story of Dull Knife's flight is such a magnificent one that undoubtedly it stimulated author Chadwick to putting out a great piece of work. Few people know much about that tragic bit of Cheyenne history, but it is a story fit to rank alongside the epics of Greece and Rome, among the heroic stories of any people. I'm sure you know more about the Cheyennes now and understand more about our American Indians since you've read it.

I may be wrong, but it seems to me that THE RIO KID WESTERN Magazine gets better and better all the time. The last few stories were really great. Are your other magazines as good as this one?

—Louis Bishop, Los Angeles, Calif.

Haven't you heard? TEXAS RANGERS is tops in its field, features the adventures of Jim Hatfield, the Lone Wolf Ranger. EXCITING WESTERN publishes a rib-tickling, hilarious story in each issue by that old master of the Western story, W. C. Tuttle, featuring the adventures of a pair of slightly punchy cattle detectives named Tombstone and Speedy. And GIANT WESTERN publishes a full book-length

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RAIDERS of DEADWOOD

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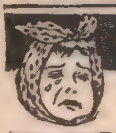

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Well, it's been nice having this chat with you, but it's time to go now, so just let me remind you to write us when you get a chance. A penny postcard will do if you can't find an envelope. Address The Editor, RIO KID WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. And we'll be mighty proud to hear from you.

—THE EDITOR.

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THE BOOTHILL BUSTER

(Continued from page 105)

in the air like the yellow-livered skunk you are and be shot to pieces!"

A desperate, crafty gleam of hope seeped into Breen's gleaming eyes. Slowly he lowered his hands. He licked his red lips. Rivulets of sweat streamed down his face. Then, without stopping the downward move of his hands, his body jerked convulsively. He lunged frantically for the silver-handled gun, a split-second ahead of Jim Tantor.

Breen took time to raise his gun muzzle to a level with Tantor's chest. Jim Tantor's gun blazed from the table top, and the terrific force of the close-range bullet smashed Ike Breen halfway across the room.

A SUDDEN wave of sound broke over the outlaw village then. Men shouted, boots pounded the ground, converging on Breen's hut.

Jim Tantor smashed the lamp to the floor, plunging the room into blackness. He groped in the darkness for Helen Darcy, found her and drew her to a back window. With the muzzle of his gun he smashed the glass, lifted the girl, shoved her through the opening and followed her.

Hand in hand, they raced toward the corrals a hundred yards behind the huts. A dark, bulky figure reared up before them and a gun blazed almost in their faces. Savage pain slashed at Jim's side. He staggered, went to his knees. Helen, sobbing softly, pulled him to his feet and they reeled on.

But now a black wave of yelling, cursing humanity poured between the cabins and raced after them. Angry bullets lashed out at them from outlaw guns.

Jim stopped, left hand pressed to his bleeding side, gun in his other hand. He flung Helen Darcy behind him and faced the oncoming owlhoot horde. But Helen didn't stay behind him. She snatched his other gun from its holster, and its

[*Turn page*]

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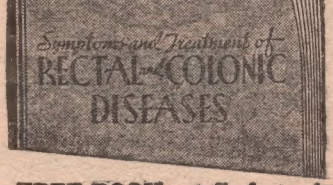

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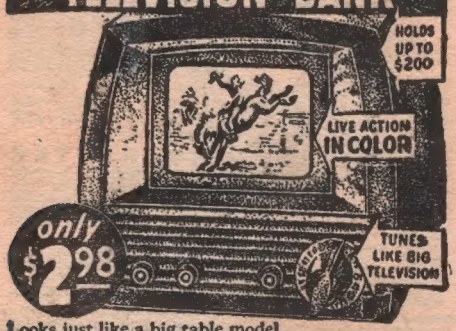

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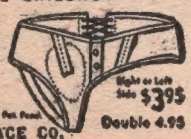

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snarling roar blended with the thunder of his own weapon.

The outlaws faltered, wavered, but gained momentum and swept relentlessly on, flare from gun flashes lighting their fierce, eager faces. Side by side, their guns blazing their titanic thunder of rage, Jim Tantor and Helen Darcy made what they knew must be their last stand against the dead Breen's killers.

Then, all at once, the world seemed to explode before Jim Tantor's eyes. Hot pain beat at his head. He felt himself falling, felt Helen's slim arms about him. His body felt numb, paralyzed.

It seemed to Jim Tantor that hours had passed before he could move. But when he tried, Helen's arms held him to the ground. Gradually, he became aware of a new sound that had broken over the valley.

There was a roar of hoofs as half a hundred horsemen swept with cyclonic speed in from the pass. The cavalcade broke like a destroying tidal wave upon the outlaw shacks. Lashing gun-flame made the valley almost as light as day. By its leaping blaze Jim Tantor saw the grim-set faces of the Chugwater Basin ranchers, as their guns roared out their unleashed hate and vengeance against Ike Breen's raiders.

Jim knew that the surprised outlaws were on the run. He knew that the hard-faced ranchers were gunning them down like the wolves they were, firing their hovels. He knew too that with Ike Breen and the worst of his hirelings dead, peace and prosperity would return to the fertile Basin.

Gradually the gunfire slackened, died, and quiet settled over the valley. Helen Darcy, her young arms still about Jim Tantor, looked down at him and smiled.

"The fight's over," she said. "The ranchers have won, and we're safe."

Jim didn't say anything. He reached his one good arm and pulled her soft, willing lips down to his own. And in that instant he knew that much of the bitterness of the past would be forgotten in the sweetness of the future.

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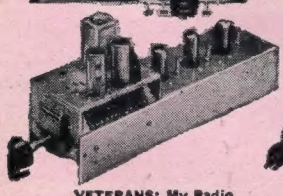

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